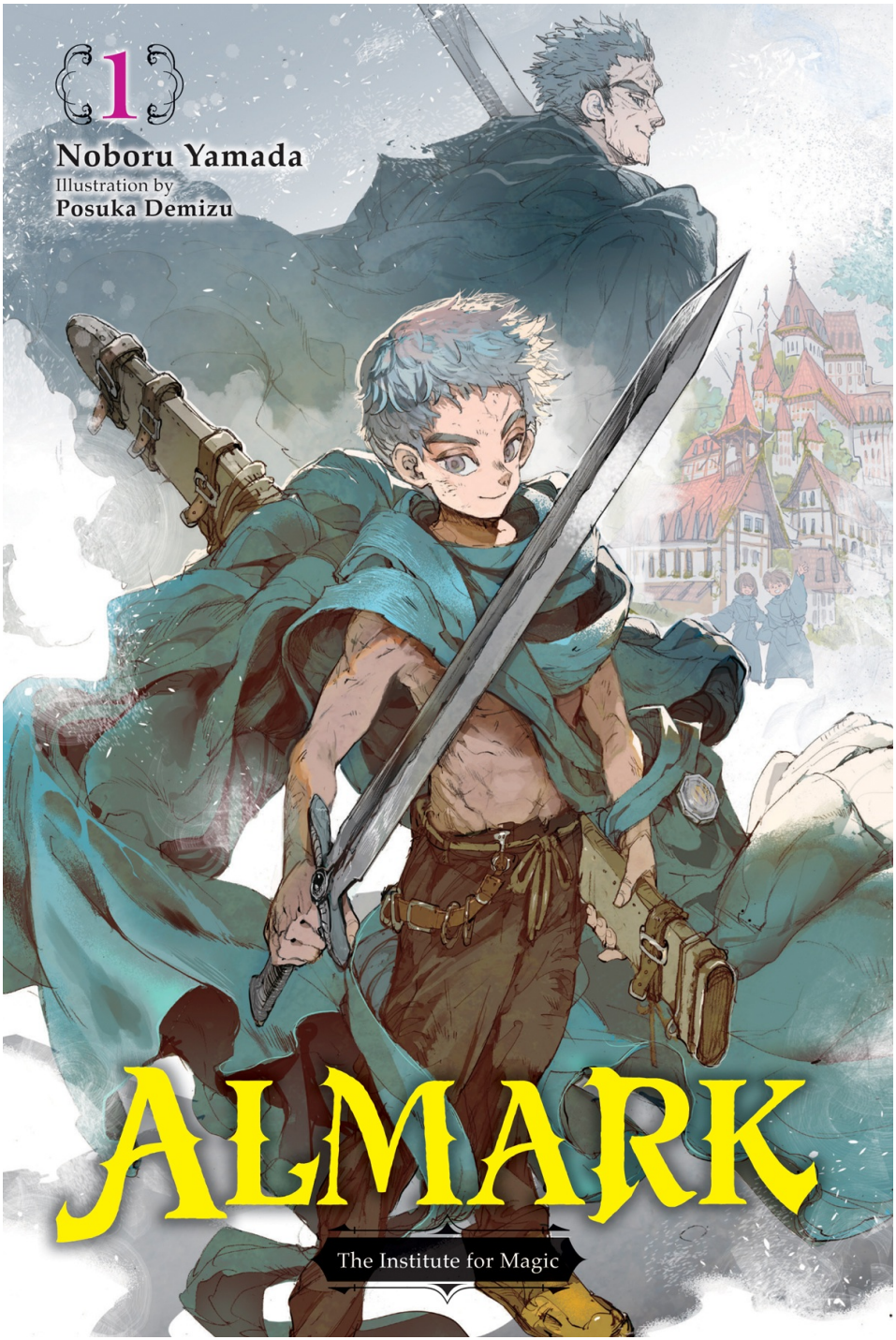
1
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ALMARK
The Institute for Magic

13
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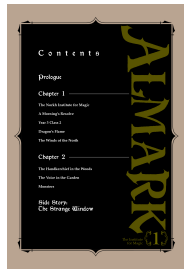
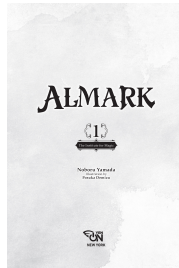
ALMARK

ALMARK Characters
Wollis Mozwill
Reiz
Tohrk Shifei
Morgan
Almark
Wendy Baherb


Contents
Prologue
Chapter 1
The Sixth Institute for Magic
A Morning's Routine
Part 1 Class A
Dragon's Flame
The Wrath of the North
Chapter 2
The Handkerchief in the Woods
The Year in the Garden
Monsters
Side Story
The Strange Window
ALMARK
Reincarnated Lich King
Vol.1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ALMARK

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Contents

Cover
Insert
Title Page
Copyright

Prologue

Chapter 1

- The Norkh Institute for Magic
- A Morning's Resolve
- Year 3 Class 2
- Dragon's Flame
- The Winds of the North

Chapter 2

- The Handkerchief in the Woods
- The Voice in the Garden
- Monsters

Side Story: The Strange Window

Yen Newsletter

Prologue

Almark began his studies at the Norkh Institute for Magic two years later than his classmates.

While the boys and girls who would become his classmates were taking their first steps into the institute in the South, Almark was on a desolate battlefield in the North, cutting down foes with his sword and bathing in their blood.

After all, Almark was the son of a Northern mercenary.

A hundred years had passed since the fires of war in the South had gone out. The wars in the northern region, on the other hand, showed no signs of subsiding. Over the course of forty-five years, numerous countries rose and fell as many lives were lost in vain, and yet the Northerners failed to form a strong, permanent nation.

Across the continent, bloodied warriors dreaming of success and riches naturally began gathering in the North. They ran from one battlefield to another without any greater moral cause, and sensible, prudent people grew to fear and avoid these warriors they called the Northern mercenaries.

Almark's father, Reiz, was the vice-captain of one of the strongest Northern mercenary groups, the Black Wolf Riders.

Almark was only five years old when he first met Eurog, the headmaster of the Norkh Institute for Magic.

Mercenary groups rarely stayed in one place for long. They were constantly moving wherever new employers and battlefields called.

The Black Wolf Riders' main unit had been marching through a buffer zone between the Filan and Gil-ba kingdoms, which had been locked in skirmishes for many years.

A march was never a safe endeavor in the North. Noticing a cloud of dust on the road ahead, Reiz scouted the spot with ten of his finest cavaliers.

"Follow me, and don't break from the group," Reiz ordered his men before taking off to the front of the line.

They soon found out who they were up against—a gang of bandits-turned-mercenaries who had made their den close by. This pack of drifters normally raided nearby villages and passing caravans for supplies, but whenever there was war in the area, they made themselves out as mercenaries to profit off the conflict. They numbered roughly thirty or so.

The bandits appeared to be chasing down a traveling old man. Reiz cursed under his breath. *Damn eyesores.* Reports had come in that the Gil-ba Kingdom's military was deployed up ahead, so he decided to quickly rout the bandits and make a little headway forward. Reiz turned to his subordinates.

"Let's go," he called.

At the time, Reiz thought nothing of the old man being pursued. His focus was strictly on the bandits; the old man in question was inconsequential.

Reiz and his cavaliers launched a surprise attack into the bandits' flanks. Faced with the intensity of the Black Wolves' offensive, the bandits were torn asunder despite having a three-to-one advantage. By the time Reiz cut down his seventh bandit, the battle was all but over.

"The rest got away, huh?" Reiz muttered, looking around.

The remainder of the bandits had fled, leaving the corpses of their comrades behind. It was then that Reiz turned his attention to the old man, who was catching his breath. Through labored gasps, he thanked the Black Wolves for saving him in his time of need.

"Looks like you had a bad day, old-timer," said Reiz. "This area's going to become a full-blown battlefield soon. I don't recommend traveling alone."

He turned to his subordinates, who were sifting through the bandits' corpses for valuables, and hollered at them to cut it out.

Reiz then took a headcount. “Venna got himself killed,” he muttered. “Let’s keep going a little further. Need to get a good look at the Gil-ba army.”

Just as his subordinates mounted their steeds, he remembered the old man was still there and turned to face him.

“Wait here for a while and our main unit should catch up to you. If you’ve come to your senses and changed your mind about traveling alone, tell ’em Reiz sent you, and they’ll let you on the carriage. Heh—don’t worry. We’re a traveling mercenary band. We’ve got women and cubs with us. We can take you all the way to the border.” Reiz paused and called out to his men. “All right, let’s go, boys.”

He didn’t even wait for the old man’s response. Under Reiz’s command, the ten Black Wolf Riders galloped off.

By the time he returned to his main unit’s camp, Reiz had all but forgotten about the old man.

He was hoping to catch a glimpse of the Gil-ba army, but they were nowhere to be found. Apparently, they had changed course and moved east for strategic reasons. Having lost sight of their immediate enemies, the Black Wolf Riders decided to march forward and resume their mission of securing a logistic route for the Filan Kingdom.

Reiz gave his report and, dead tired, was just leaving the captain’s tent when he was approached by one of the women in charge of the unit’s cooking. She told him they had picked up a strange old man who claimed to be an acquaintance of his. This finally reminded Reiz of the man he’d rescued.

“Hey, old-timer,” he said.

The old man was sitting at the corner of the carriage. When Reiz called out to him, the man hurried to his feet and bowed his head respectfully, introducing himself as Eurog.

“I’m Reiz, the vice-captain here.”

Eurog told Reiz he wanted to thank him for his kindness. Reiz simply smiled, as if to ask what the old man could possibly do for him, expecting the answer to be that he could at most help with the cooking.

Eurog explained he was the headmaster of a magic institute from

the Garai Kingdom, a large nation to the south. He was traveling in search of talented children to enroll in his school. Reiz had a hard time taking him seriously and laughed him off.

"I lost my staff during my travels, so this is as much as I can muster…," Eurog explained.

He picked up a pebble from the ground and threw it overhead, where it turned into a bird and fluttered away.

"Guess he wasn't lying," Reiz muttered to himself, and then looked up at Eurog. "I've heard of the Norkh Institute. They say it's where kids with a talent for magic get the same opportunity as anyone else, nationality or station be damned. They also say graduates are in high demand just about everywhere. So you're telling me you're the headmaster?"

Eurog nodded and added to Reiz's vague understanding of the place.

The institute was located on Norkh Island, in the Garai Kingdom. Children became eligible for enrollment at the age of 9, and the students were divided into an elementary and intermediate division, spending three years in each. Upon completion of the boarding school's six-year curriculum, graduates were officially recognized as mages. Those who wanted to master a specific field of magic could move up to the advanced division and study for an extra three years.

"Hmmm…," Reiz muttered before going quiet for a moment.

Eurog watched him wordlessly, waiting to see what he would say. Eventually, Reiz scratched his left side—the gesture he made whenever he was about to bring up something he felt too awkward to mention.

"…You said this institute of yours takes in kids with talent, yeah?"

"I did."

Reiz groaned and scratched his left side again before cutting to the chase. "I have a favor to ask," he said. "It's about my son."

"Your son?"

"Yeah. Name's Almark. He's five years old." Reiz kept scratching his side. "His mother passed soon after he was born, and I had to raise him alone. He doesn't have a lot of pluck—the kid's real timid. And being a mercenary is dangerous work. Forget about enemies—

you can't even trust your allies. Only ones you can count are a handful of true friends. I can tell you this for sure: If my boy becomes a mercenary, he won't live to see fifteen."

Eurog silently listened to Reiz's explanation.

"I mean, I get it. He probably doesn't have any talent for magic. But even so, as long as he finds his footing in the South where there's no war, he won't have to fight. He'll be able to survive. So please, let him into your school."

Reiz bowed his head.

Eurog watched him silently for a moment, but then laughed. "It's strange, isn't it? You saved my life, and yet here you are, bowing your head to me. Let me see your son."

Reiz agreed, and the two got to their feet.

It was already getting dark, and dinner was being prepared. Reiz pointed at one of the campfires where several women were busily getting the food ready. One boy was idly sitting beside them, a red glow on his face from the crackling flames.

"Almark."

The boy looked up at his father's call. His face was unexpectedly intelligent, but his timid eyes spoke to his gentle nature.

Spotting his father, the boy hurried over to him happily, but stopped in his tracks when he saw the unfamiliar old man next to him.

"Don't worry, Almark. Gramps here is a nice man," Reiz said.

Almark, however, hid behind him.

"He's being shy." Reiz sighed. "Come on, don't embarrass yourself."

"I'd say he has quite the sagacious face. Being cautious is a sign of wisdom," Eurog said as he approached Almark and bent down to look at the boy at eye level.

Almark clung to Reiz's leg, refusing to budge, but Reiz dragged him forward. When Eurog reached out to gently pat Almark's head, the boy trembled and looked like he was about to burst into tears.

"Quit your cowering, Almark!" Reiz shouted.

The moment Eurog's hand rested on Almark's head, a crackle ran through the two like electricity. Eurog's expression turned to shock as he retracted his hand.

"What's wrong?" Reiz asked.

Eurog gazed wide eyed at Almark. “Well, now… Color me surprised.” Rubbing his hand, Eurog informed Reiz that his son had astounding magical potential. “I have seen many a talented child in my years…but one with this much potential is a first.”

“Really?” Reiz asked, sincerely pleased.

He had no idea what magic talent entailed, but it was clear the old man acknowledged his son.

“I’m sure his gift for the sword will bloom before long. He would make a fine mercenary as well,” said Eurog.

“A gift for the sword doesn’t mean much,” Reiz replied instantly. “What a mercenary needs is a heart that’s tough enough to keep ’em going on their own. Strong or weak, that’s all secondary.” He mussed Almark’s hair. “And I don’t think my boy has a heart like that in him.”

“…Well, in that case.” Eurog nodded and gave Reiz a detailed explanation of how to get to the institute.

It was located on Norkh Island, in the seas south of the Garai Kingdom. For those living in the North, this was a terribly remote land, practically on the other side of the world.

Reiz flashed a dauntless smile, however. “He just needs to go there, aye? And that’s how he’ll become a mage.”

“Yes.” Eurog looked down at Almark, who was still clinging to his father’s leg. “Bring him to the institute when he turns nine years old. I promise I’ll make a fine mage out of your boy.”

“All right. I’ll make sure to take him there. Lucky you, Almark.”

Reiz hugged his son, who understood none of what was going on except for his sweat-drenched father’s embrace.

After that, Eurog traveled with them to the border and parted ways upon thanking Reiz multiple times.

True to Eurog’s prediction, Almark grew into a wise boy. Reiz never tried teaching him how to wield a sword, but Almark picked up one of his father’s spare adult-size blades and started training on his own. He was still taciturn and shy, but as he matured, his eyes shone with a hardened, insightful light.

Almark’s talent with the sword matured quickly, as if he were in a race against something. With each swing, his sword cut noisily through the wind, and Reiz gave him bits and pieces of advice.

One day, when Almark was eight, something astonishing happened. Most of the Black Wolves' fighters left the main unit and headed to battle. They were up against a mercenary group called the Morris Knights, powerful opponents even the mighty Black Wolves couldn't make light of. As such, the group's women, children, and elderly were left behind in the main unit.

But then, two people broke into the main unit—vagrant mercenaries, and both strong warriors. They soon slayed five people in cold blood. As the women fled in a panic, Almark suddenly stepped up to oppose the intruders. He skillfully wielded one of his father's longswords, a weapon too big for a child, and swiftly cut the two mercenaries down.

Reiz returned to the main unit wounded after battling the Morris Knights' top fighter, Galkash the White Gale, to a draw. When the women told him what had happened, he frowned and grumbled under his breath. Jerus, the Black Wolves' captain, slapped Reiz on the shoulder and suggested sending Almark to the front lines. If the boy could cut down two mercenaries, Jerus said, he was good enough for the battlefield.

Even in this land, where twelve was considered of age and therefore capable of fighting, Almark was extremely young at eight years old. But Reiz called Almark over, telling him he should try to go out on the battlefield come springtime. Almark agreed.

Winter passed, and Almark's ninth spring came. This was the year Reiz had promised Eurog he'd send Almark to Norkh—however, political tensions in the North grew rapidly worse, and circumstances didn't allow Reiz to leave the Black Wolf Riders for long. Instead of going to the Institute for Magic, Almark was sent out on his first real battle. He fought among the adults and killed four enemies. His father told him to join the next fight, too.

Almark's second battle ended in defeat for the Black Wolves. Instead of studying in a classroom, he shed his own blood in the frigid northern lands.

Every day, small skirmishes broke out. Five major battles later, the season turned to summer. By then, Almark was a seasoned warrior. Rumors of the peculiarly strong kid in the Black Wolf Riders began spreading among the mercenaries of the North.

Nonetheless, Reiz had far from given up on sending his boy to the

institute. On days with no fighting, he called Almark over and taught him as much as he could about scholarly pursuits: reading and writing, basic arithmetic, proper diction, survival skills, and even Reiz's own personal philosophy. And Almark took it all in like a sponge, just as quickly as he had learned to wield a sword.

It was clear to everyone that he was an intelligent boy, but Almark still devoted the rest of his free time to practicing the sword. Reiz wasn't happy with this, in truth, but he didn't try to stop him, either. And so, Almark spent his ninth summer in a way Reiz found to be terribly wasteful.

One day, Almark nearly died in battle against Angol the Land Shark, the top fighter of the Garrett Heavy Infantry mercenary group. Angol had run his spear through Almark's chest. By some miracle, Almark survived, but he remained bedridden for a month. This forced Reiz to make up his mind and accept that he needed to part ways with his son.

When Almark finally recovered, Reiz called him over and told him to pack his things and prepare for the journey south. Almark resisted at first, insisting he wanted to fight at his father's side, but Reiz shouted at him.

"You fool! You're just holding us back!"

Indeed, the Black Wolves were about to head into the Bastia Kingdom, one of the most violently contested areas in the North. And the fighting there wouldn't be the only danger.

"I'll get stronger," Almark said.

Reiz scoffed at him. "Not fast enough, you won't," Reiz spat.

Almark went quiet, and Reiz carried on, his tone softening.

"Almark," he began. "Go out there and become someone who truly matters."

Almark looked up at his father, taken aback.

"Listen to me," Reiz said. "No job pays off less than being a mercenary. There's plenty of stories about guys who made a name for themselves and went on to become knights, but the truth is, they're few and far between. Most just get taken advantage of and thrown to the wolves when their employers have no use for them anymore. You've seen it yourself—all those corpses of mercenaries littering the battlefield. That's where we end up. And being good with a sword won't be enough to save you from that fate. Use your

head, Almark. Go find your path. One that's right for you. Learn to think for yourself without relying on me. Study hard, be wise, and become someone who matters. Someone who can spur others to action."

Almark remained silent for a moment before quietly replying, "Yes, Father."

"Atta boy." Reiz smiled. "Now, go say goodbye to everyone."

Almark nodded and left the tent.

There were two other children around Almark's age. One was Mary, a clever girl a year his junior who admired Almark like he was her real brother. She worked with the women, handling everything from cooking to cleaning. With a teary smile, Mary hugged Almark and asked him never to forget her.

Galba was the same age as Almark and the son of the master axe fighter Geizak the Black War Axe. He had yet to take part in his first battle, of course, but was a highly competitive boy who challenged Almark at every turn. Galba wished him well and swore to become a true warrior by the next time they met.

Almark then went around to the Black Wolf Riders who had helped him out in combat, starting with Captain Jerus. Then there was Molgard, as cool-headed as ever, followed by Gador, who had a foul mouth but was as skilled as they came, and Galba's father, Geizak. They all patted Almark on the shoulder and bid him a safe journey.

He then went to see Derak, the veteran commander of a ten-man squad who had taken a liking to Almark in battle and treated him well. A forlorn smile made its way to the man's tanned face.

"Don't worry, boy. You're your father's son." Derak's low growl of a voice filled Almark's heart. "Never forget that. Wherever you go, you're bound to be successful," Derak said with a grin.

The next morning, Almark departed. Reiz came to see him off.

"You're already a fine warrior. I know I have nothing to worry about," Reiz said, smiling. "But the world we live in, nothing is for sure."

He reached into his pocket and took out a small, red pendant.

"This belonged to Shetina." His deceased wife's name. "It should keep you safe from whatever may come."

"Thank you." Almark put down his luggage and accepted the

pendant with both hands. “I’ll be off, then… Take care, Father.”

“Aye.”

And so, father and son parted ways.

After a minute or two of walking, Almark turned around and saw Reiz was still watching him. Almark waved heartily, which Reiz met with a raised hand before returning to camp.

Farewell, Father.

Reiz was soon out of sight, and that was their final farewell. Almark never saw his father again.

To reach the Norkh Institute for Magic, Almark had to cross the dangerous northern lands, traverse the central plains at the heart of the continent, and finally trek through the southern regions. Even with his experience as a mercenary, Almark was still only a nine-year-old boy. Journeying through the North was far more grueling than he had ever imagined. And to make things worse, the season changed from autumn to winter.

Cold, hunger, monsters, and cold-hearted people—the North had many threats to Almark. He nearly lost his life more than once, but each time, he survived with sword skills that belied his age, along with a great deal of luck.

Along the way he occasionally joined up with traveling mercenary groups or vagabond mages and warriors. Eight times out of ten, these people he relied on betrayed him. It was a bitter lesson that cut him deep, and yet it made him an excellent judge of character.

As he crossed the Menoba Strait separating the northern regions from the central plains, the first blooms of spring appeared. The difficult journey whetted Almark's senses, and he developed many essential survival skills.

The central plains were bountiful now that the wars there were long since over. This was where Almark experienced true wonder for the first time in his life. People led mundane lives, never questioning the fact that nothing ever changed. Lives where they didn't need to worry over what they'd eat tomorrow. Almark observed them, captivated. These people treated him nicely. Even in this world where children reached maturity early, it was unusual for a nine-year-old to travel alone from the North, and the plains inhabitants considered Almark superhuman for making the journey.

Passing through the central plains was what taught him the pleasures of travel and the kindness of others. He also got to experience the riches of countries without war.

Almark's tenth spring turned to summer, and then autumn came. When he arrived in the South, his supplies ran out. Almark continued his journey nearly in rags. The season turned to winter, but after surviving Northern winters, the cold of the South didn't bother him at all. He set up camp every day and practiced talking to himself as he gazed at the starry sky.

Soon enough, Almark entered his eleventh spring. Norkh Island was a stone's throw, or rather a boat's voyage away, and so he worked for a month at the docks to earn the fare. He eventually boarded a ship using the money he'd earned, and after a two-year delay, Almark fulfilled his promise to Eurog—he arrived at the Norkh Institute for Magic.

Chapter 1

The Norkh Institute for Magic

The Norkh Institute for Magic was bigger than Almark ever imagined.

Norkh Island was by no means small, but according to the townsfolk he asked for directions, the institute grounds took up a third of the island's territory. Almark was shocked. He had seen large castles and mansions in his travels, but the idea of one facility taking up this much space was unheard of to him.

Quieting his racing heart, he asked for the way to the front gate. The islanders cheerfully told him to walk down the main road, and that he couldn't miss it. Almark breathed a sigh of relief.

He quickly realized why the islanders had said he couldn't miss it. Walking down the path, he soon found himself in what appeared to be a large temple. Believing it was the institute's schoolhouse, he looked around for a main gate, but couldn't find anything that looked right.

Approaching it, Almark realized that what he thought was a giant temple was in fact the front gate of the Norkh Institute for Magic. Standing in front of the gate, Almark called out for someone, and a young guard emerged. Almark told the guard he was there to see the headmaster, but the guard didn't pay him any attention and tried to shoo him away. Almark insisted that the headmaster, Eurog, had invited him to become a student there.

Seeing how adamant Almark was, the guard paused, surprised the boy knew the headmaster's name. He looked Almark up and down, noting his ragged clothes, and eventually agreed to take him to Eurog—albeit reluctantly.

Upon crossing the gate, Almark found himself in a well-

maintained garden that landscapers were busily tending to. After walking through the lawn for what felt like quite a while, the trees finally cleared, revealing a large building.

"This is the Norkh Institute's main campus," the guard said. "Elementary students study here for three years."

Had the guard not given this explanation, Almark would have been inclined to believe this fancy building was a noble's mansion or a royal villa. It was without a doubt the kind of place Almark had never set foot in before.

"It's amazing," Almark said sincerely.

"Indeed. I hope you end up studying here." The guard climbed up the steps to the building. "The main campus building doubles as the elementary division's classroom building. The headmaster's office is here, as well."

The guard crossed the large, opens doors, and Almark followed him inside. The building's interior was much more plain and practical-looking than the exterior, save for the red rug spread halfway across the hall. The guard stopped before a large door at the end of the corridor.

"This is the headmaster's office." He reached out to Almark, who eyed him dubiously. "Your sword," the guard added. "Apologies, but I'll have to take it while you're inside."

"Oh. Yes, sir." Almark took the sword off his back before giving it, with one hand, to the guard.

The guard picked it up with both hands, his eyes round with surprise at its weight. He then knocked on the door, the sword still in his grasp.

"Excuse me, Headmaster, there's a boy here who wishes to enroll."

"Come in," said a voice on the other side of the door.

"Thank you, sir."

The guard entered first, and Almark followed. Much like the corridor, the room had a fluffy red rug and a large desk that must have required several adults to carry inside. The walls were covered in bookshelves, lined with many thick books and all sorts of objects the likes of which Almark had never seen before.

"This is the boy in question," the guard said to the headmaster.

Almark faced the desk. On the other side was an old man with a

serene countenance and white hair—the headmaster, Eurog. Almark tried to match the face to the one he remembered, but he'd met Eurog years ago, when he didn't know what to make of the man. He searched his memories of the North but had trouble recalling what Eurog had looked like.

Almark gave up on remembering the details and carefully examined the old man. His beard was long and white, much like his hair. Almark had heard from a traveling mage about encountering a spirit of wisdom; he figured this must have been what that felt like.

"I am Eurog, headmaster of this institute… And you are?"

The old man's voice carried deep warmth. Almark's intuition told him Eurog was trustworthy.

"Yes, he was, uh, waiting by the front gate," the guard stammered, probably regretting having brought a boy in rags into the headmaster's office.

"My name is Almark, Headmaster," Almark said, ignoring the guard.

He looked closely at Eurog's face. The headmaster's eyes were a beautiful blue, like the color of the southern sea.

"Almark…," Eurog said, ruminating on the name.

"I am Almark, son of Reiz the Shadow Fang, the vice-captain of a mercenary band from the North called the Black Wolf Riders," Almark added.

The guard stared at him, surprised.

"The Black Wolves… Reiz…," Eurog muttered, and then his eyes widened in realization. "You're Sir Reiz's son, Almark?!"

"Yes. My father told me he once saved your life."

Eurog leaned forward, excited. "Zeid, stand down," he told the guard, who hurriedly moved back. "Almark, come closer and let me get a better look at you."

"Yes, sir."

Almark stood before the desk, and Eurog examined his face.

"Hmm." Eventually, the old man leaned back into his chair and exhaled. "Indeed, the son of the Black Wolf Riders' Reiz is named Almark! But you must be eleven years old already, no? Why were you two years late coming here? And why are you dressed like that? What of Sir Reiz? Is he not with you?"

"Headmaster." Almark grinned at Eurog. "I can't answer that

many questions at once."

"Oh… Yes, you're right. My apologies." Eurog shook his head.

Almark answered the headmaster's questions one by one, and once Eurog heard everything, he let out a big sigh.

"Goodness," he said. "So the Black Wolf Riders are in Bastia… The fighting in the North isn't calming down, I take it?"

"It isn't. In fact, Father says that it's only going to get worse."

"Saddening news, to be sure. We'll need the brave people of the North on our side if we're to oppose the coming of the Abyssal Lord."

"Abyssal Lord?" Almark parroted the unfamiliar words, but Eurog waved a hand with a strained smile.

"Ah, never mind me. I was simply thinking aloud. In any case, I can see that you really are the Almark I met years ago." Eurog looked at the boy with kind eyes. "You've truly grown into a fine young man."

"Thank you, Headmaster."

"May I ask you one more thing?"

"Yes, anything."

Eurog slowly rested his hands on the table. "Since you have combat experience in the North, I'm sure you've heard of the Gilfin Mercenary Magi."

"I have. They're quite unique among the many Northern mercenary groups."

Eurog nodded gravely. "Following the success of Guruda, Magus of Deathly Ashes, Southern mages flocked to the North to test their mettle in live combat. Alas, I'm ashamed to admit that a number of our alumni were among them. Many were lost to the harsh northern winter and the war, but some, like Gilfin, were triumphant. And nearly all of those people were Northerners. They'd come to this institute to learn magic and wield it in battle. But we will never again allow our advanced Southern magic to be used for nefarious purposes."

"What are you trying to tell me, Headmaster?" Almark looked at Eurog, attempting to understand what he meant.

"Think of it as a sort of entrance exam. Over the last few years, we've strictly prohibited any prospective students from the North. So let me ask you: When you've finished your studies here, what do

you intend to do with your life?" Eurog peered into Almark's eyes. "Will you go back to the North and wield your powers, like Gilfin did?"

Almark could tell that the old man's blue eyes could easily see through any frivolous answer. And so, he took a deep breath.

"I will return north," Almark replied.

Eurog was visibly surprised, but Almark continued.

"On my journey here, I was inspired by the peaceful, bountiful countries of the central plains and the South…and that made me ask myself: Could the North not have this as well? That's what I want to find out. I want to bring peace to my homeland and give its people good lives. So, to make that happen, I will return home to the North."

Eurog fixed his sagacious eyes on Almark's, and the boy gazed back into his. After one long moment that seemed to stretch for eternity, Eurog finally smiled.

"The Norkh Institute for Magic welcomes you, Almark," he said.

Once Almark left the headmaster's office, the guard laughed out loud, as if unable to hold it in any longer.

"I'll admit, I've never seen the headmaster make such a big fuss over a student!"

After chuckling for a short moment, the guard quickly turned serious and looked carefully at Almark's tough visage.

"You're quite the man," he said. "My name's Zeid. The headmaster instructed me to look after you until you go to the schoolhouse tomorrow morning. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"I'm Almark. The pleasure's all mine."

"Oh, right, you can have your sword back. Honestly, it's too heavy for me…"

"Thanks."

Zeid held out Almark's sword with both hands, and Almark picked it up with one. After attending to assorted formalities at the schoolhouse, the two went outside.

"The dorms are over there." Zeid pointed down a brick road extending south. "But first, there's something you need to do."

"Oh. What's that?" Almark asked, surprised, to which Zeid looked

at him pitifully.

"You poor thing. Your journey must have been harrowing if even a boy as bright as you can't see it. Right now you smell like a fish that's been left out in the sun for two days."

After washing himself off using a nearby well's water, Almark put his ragged clothes back on.

"I'll get you your uniform when we're at the dorm," said Zeid. "We can't have you going to class dressed like that."

"Thank you. Sorry for the trouble."

Zeid scratched his head awkwardly. "I've always heard Northerners were these brutish, savage barbarians, but…I guess I shouldn't believe everything I hear."

"Being able to kill someone isn't limited to a certain group of people," Almark said quietly, but Zeid didn't hear him.

"Now, it'll be a bit of a walk to get to the dorm… Oh, right." Zeid took off his cloak and spread it over Almark's shoulders. "This here's a pretty high-quality cloak. Keep it on while you're out and about for the time being."

"Thank you."

Almark smiled. It was a serene smile, but to Zeid it looked more like a bird of prey twisting its face into a grin.

"So you worked as a mercenary?" Zeid asked, to which Almark nodded. The guard then cocked his head. "You've got this sort of… noble air about you."

Almark shrugged at those words, not quite understanding what Zeid meant. The two fell silent for a moment as they walked on.

"There's still a while until we reach the dorms. Do you want to rest?" Zeid asked, concerned for the eleven-year-old, but Almark shook his head. Then Zeid remembered something. "Right, you walked all the way here from the North, didn't you?"

It was already sunset, and before long the dorm was in view. Almark, who had been expressionless so far, grew wide-eyed.

"Surprised?" Zeid smiled proudly when he saw the change in Almark's expression. "This dorm was originally designed to be a villa for major Garai Kingdom nobles."

That sounded accurate. At four stories tall, the luxurious mansion housed 150 of the institute's elementary students. But even with

that many children living there, it didn't seem crowded. If anything, the dorm felt like it was too big.

"I…get to live here, too?" Almark asked.

"Of course. All the elementary students live here."

Almark looked up at the building again. It stood silent and didn't give off the impression anyone was inside.

"Everyone's in class right now," Zeid explained right away, noticing Almark's curious gaze. "Let's go introduce you to the dorm supervisor first. She's a bit fussy, but she's a nice lady."

"Ah, all right."

Almark followed Zeid through the large doors to the dorm. Although it looked like a mansion on the outside, the interior was much plainer. Any needless decorations had been removed, making it look more like a student dorm.

At the end of the first-floor corridor was a door with a sign that read DORM SUPERVISOR'S OFFICE.

"This is it. She should have gotten word you were coming while we filled out the paperwork," Zeid said before knocking on the door. "Miss Maya, are you in?"

A moment later, a hoarse voiced answered from inside the room, speaking very rapidly. "Don't bother knocking, I never lock this thing anyway. Now quit dawdling and come inside."

Zeid motioned for Almark to stand beside him and opened the door.

"…?"

For a second, Almark stared blankly. The room appeared to be empty. An unfinished knitting project was sitting on the table at the center of the room, and a rocking chair swayed behind that. It was as if someone had been there just a moment ago, but he couldn't see anyone.

Almark was positively impressed. The mages of the Norkh Institute for Magic really were astounding. The dorm supervisor must have turned herself invisible somehow.

"Where are you looking, boy? I'm down here," said a voice right beneath him.

"Huh?"

Standing before him was a tiny old lady, two heads shorter than Almark. She was so bent over that it almost looked like she was

trying to reach the floor.

"Miss Maya, this is our new student, Almark," Zeid told her.

"Hello." Almark bowed his head.

Without a word, Maya raised her chin and examined Almark up and down with a glance before walking back to her rocking chair with surprising swiftness. She hopped onto the chair and resumed her knitting.

"Yes, I've heard," she said. "You'll be living here until you graduate. Just don't come crying to me if you miss your mommy, you hear? You get two meals a day, morning and night. If you're not at the dining hall on time, we put away all the food. You get your lunch in the schoolhouse. Any complaints about the food, take them up with the head cook, Guin. Judging by your cloak, I'm guessing you're some rich kid from a good family, so don't come to me whining about how your room's too small or your bed's not soft enough. Keep in mind we've got a hundred and fifty students to accommodate here. You're in the corner room on the third floor. That's room 314."

"Oh, wasn't it 341?" Zeid chimed in.

Maya shook her head in annoyance. "Aye, if you say so. The key's over there. Any questions?"

"No, nothing for now," Almark said.

Maya nodded briefly before returning to her knitting as if neither Almark nor Zeid was still there.

"Let's get going, Almark. Thank you, Miss Maya."

Zeid pushed Almark's back, leading him out of the room.

"She called me a rich kid from a good family," Almark said, smiling.

How surprised would she be if she saw the tattered clothes under his cloak?

"I told you, it's a nice cloak. Your room's on the third floor. Let's go."

Zeid led Almark up a staircase that had an elaborate engraving on its railing, likely a remnant of its original design as a noble's villa. Almark's room was on the end of the third floor's east wing. It was a single room, and though it was indeed small, it was plenty spacious enough for him to sleep in. It had a large window, as well as a bed and a desk set against the walls.

It was already dark out, so Zeid lit the lamp hanging from the ceiling.

"The other rooms are doubles, but you'll get this one all to yourself. At least for the rest of your remaining year in the elementary division."

"All right. It's a nice room," Almark said, putting what few belongings he had on the floor before leaning his longsword against the wall.

"Your things are mostly your sword, huh? I swear, even poor farm kids bring more than this…," Zeid said with a slightly bothered smile.

"This is enough for me." Almark removed the cloak and handed it to Zeid. "Thank you."

"Mm, right…" Zeid reexamined Almark's outfit as he accepted the cloak. "I'll get you your new clothes for tomorrow in a bit. You'll need something to wear under your standard issue robe. Just go ahead and take off the clothes you've got on. Wouldn't want them to stink up the bed."

"Right."

Almark nodded and took off his shirt, revealing his toned physique. Zeid couldn't help but stare—his body was much more rugged and muscular than a child's should be. He didn't get a good look at Almark when the boy washed off at the well, but even under the lamplight, Zeid could tell Almark's body was rippling with muscles. And then there were the nasty-looking scars that spoke silently of his harsh journey.

Zeid realized just how unimaginably difficult the road that led this boy here must have been, and the thought that an eleven-year-old successfully treaded it made it look much harder.

"Zeid?"

Almark's voice pulled Zeid out of his thoughts.

"Oh… Sorry. I'll go get you your dinner, so you just take your time and rest. I'll bring you your change of clothes, too."

"Okay."

It was then that Almark suddenly heard voices from under the dorm. Looking down from the window, he could see the students of the elementary division returning to the dorm. They were all in dark blue robes—probably the institute's uniform.

“Everyone must be back since it’s almost dinnertime,” Zeid told Almark. “They’ll be your schoolmates starting tomorrow.”

“Schoolmates… Right.”

Almark nodded, but it didn’t feel real to him. He had often seen children making merry on their way home from school during his travels south through the central plains. But come tomorrow, he would be one of those children. It felt…odd.

“I guess…I made it,” Almark whispered.

At the end of many hardships, after much sorrow and despair, and through all the surprises and new experiences, he’d finally made it. This was the first step in Almark’s new journey at the Norkh Institute for Magic.

A Morning's Resolve

A frigid gale howled through the Northern lands. Almark raced across a field, his trusted longsword in hand and his body covered in black leather armor. The hundred or so comrades charging with him were all dressed similarly.

They moved like a pack of wolves, converging on one spot—a force of enemies. Their foes rode large horses, were clad in heavy metal armor, and didn't seem to react at all to Almark and his comrades' charge. As the two forces drew closer, the heat coursing through Almark's body erupted in a loud battle cry. His comrades did the same, raising their voices in vigor.

But then, it happened.

Without warning, the grass under Almark's and his comrades' feet came to life, coiling around their legs. And just as their charge was forced to a stop, the enemy commander reacted. His eyes glinted from behind his helmet, glowing menacingly as they fixed on Almark. Almark knew him. Marismorg the Iron Rider, of the Zel Interceptor Mercenary Company, a man who dreaded nothing and had never been taken down, no matter his foe.

"Cut them down!" Marismorg bellowed.

At his order, his men began charging toward Almark and his comrades. Almark tried to move his legs, but the grass coiled tightly around his knees. Marismorg was already right in front of him, his spear held aloft and his men right behind him.

"I said m-moooove!"

Almark woke up to the sound of his own voice. The sun, having just risen, was shining through his window. He reflexively jumped

up and, fumbling for his longsword, tumbled off the bed. It was the impact of his fall that finally made him understand where he was.

"Right… I'm at Norkh…"

He got to his feet, scratched his head hard, and picked up his longsword. He remembered what he'd just seen in his dream. It was something that had actually happened to him. Marismorg hadn't been as close as he was in the dream, and soon after they were trapped, Reiz's cavalry arrived in the nick of time to save them.

His comrades later told him the grass trap they had stumbled into was the result of a spell. The Zel Interceptor Mercenary Company had hired a mage. And that was, in fact, Almark's first encounter with magic. His father wasn't one for superstitions or jinxes, but he hated the fact that Almark's first experience with magic nearly got him killed. Reiz then ordered his subordinates to immediately cut down any enemies wearing a robe or holding a staff.

Almark didn't remember how the battle went after that. Being on the battlefield for days on end had drained all his energy.

Almark drew the sword from its sheath. Looking at the light shining off the worn, nicked steel gradually calmed him down. After a moment of fiddling with a small protrusion in the scabbard's edge, a small red pendant clicked free and dropped into his hand.

A memento of Shetina—Almark's mother. When Reiz first gave it to Almark, he'd hung it around the boy's neck, but after many close calls, Almark fitted the pendant in his sword's scabbard so that he wouldn't lose it. In Almark's mind, the scabbard housed what protected him the most. The moment he lost his longsword would be the moment he died.

Moreover, he believed that this pendant had helped him avoid death. He doubted he would have survived his journey south without it. His father's longsword and his mother's pendant; those two had always kept him safe.

"I made it, Father… Mother."

Suddenly, he heard a quiet click from the door. Zeid had entered the room and shut the door behind him.

"Good morning. Did you sleep well?" he asked Almark. "Whoa, why are you holding that thing?!"

"Oh, good morning, Zeid," Almark replied. He pushed the pendant back into its hiding place and put his sword away.

“I got you some breakfast. You’ll be eating with everyone at the dining hall downstairs tonight, but they don’t have enough seats for breakfast yet.”

“Wow, it smells delicious.” Almark took the tray from Zeid and sat on the bed. “Thank you.”

He nimbly devoured the food. It almost looked like he had no time to taste it.

“That was good,” Almark said once he’d finished his breakfast. He leaped to his feet. “I’d like to wash my face and fix my hair. Is there a wash basin somewhere?”

“There’s a washroom in the dorm, but the quickest way would be… See, over there.” Zeid pointed down from the window. And indeed, there were five large wells there.

“You’re right… I’ll be back in a minute.”

Almark briskly changed into the clothes Zeid got him and stepped out of the room, hurrying down the stairs. As he passed through the first floor, he heard children laughing from the largest room nearby. Almark realized this must have been the dining hall and, peering inside, saw many kids chatting and joking together as they ate. For a moment, he imagined himself sitting there, surrounded by friends, and flashed a sad smile at how unreal that felt.

Let’s do what I can for now.

There was already someone using the wells: a girl about Almark’s age, with a distinctive, striking face. She had sleek, waist-length black hair that she was carefully washing.

“Good morning,” Almark said, earning him a glance from the girl. Her eyes were very spirited.

“Who’re you? I haven’t seen you around,” she replied. Her voice was pretty, but cold.

“I just arrived here yesterday.”

“…Oh. I did hear about a new student.” The girl looked down, disinterested.

“You’ve heard about me?”

“There’ve been rumors about you since yesterday. They say you’re the first new student in decades to enroll in the middle of the year. Everyone’s so excited to see who this talented kid is… But, hmm. That’s you, huh?”

The girl had clearly lost all interest in Almark.

“Sorry if I don’t live up to everyone’s expectations,” Almark said, not terribly fazed by her attitude as he pulled up water from the well and washed his face. The water was cold and pleasant. “I’m Almark. And you are?”

“Leila. Leila Kugan.”

A surname. She must have been a noble’s daughter.

“Everyone’s having breakfast,” Almark told the girl as he fixed his hair. “You’re not hungry?”

“I’m fine with a small breakfast.”

“Hmm. And they don’t scold you or anything?”

“Miss Maya can be a bit annoying if she notices, but she’s only there at the beginning.”

“Hmm.”

“Are we done? If you have more questions later, ask someone else.” Leila looked the other way.

Almark did the same and tended to his hair in silence before returning to his room. He found Zeid fixedly eyeing the longsword that leaned against the wall.

“Oh, you’re back,” Zeid said when he spotted Almark. “I was just thinking that this is a really nice blade. I’m no expert, but this has to be some top-class craftsmanship, right?”

Almark shook his head. “I’m not sure. I just borrowed it from my father. But it must be pretty sturdy to still be in one piece after how rough I’ve been with it.”

“Rough with it, he says…,” Zeid muttered to himself before peering at Almark’s face. “You look a bit tired. Did something happen downstairs?”

“…I ran into a girl.”

“Oh? Who?”

“She said her name was Leila… Leila Kugan.”

“Leila, huh?” Zeid’s eyes widened. “She’s a bit harsh, isn’t she?”

“Yeah.” Almark nodded sincerely. “She seemed disappointed that I was the new student.”

“Really? Ah-ha-ha!” Zeid laughed cheerfully. “So Leila was the first girl you met, huh? That’s a shame. If only it’d been Wendy instead.”

“Wendy?” Almark asked, having never heard this name before. “Who’s that?”

Zeid started to answer, but was interrupted by a bell from outside the building and went pale.

“Oh, is it that time already? Hurry up and get changed into your uniform. We have to get you to the schoolhouse.”

Almark nodded and put on his dark-blue robes. Zeid was urging him to hurry, so he didn’t have much time to relish his first moments in a mage’s robe, but his heart did race with excitement.

Mages—those who wielded magic, manipulated invisible forces, and touched on the abyss.

In the North, mages were nothing but dangerous, crafty foes that employed all manner of tricks. So when Almark’s father told him he would one day study magic, Almark was at first shocked. He taught himself how to wield a sword because he’d thought that if he honed his combat skills, his father might change his mind.

When he started going to the battlefield with his father’s approval, Almark had fully believed he would never be anything but a mercenary. He was surrounded by mercenaries; that lifestyle was all he knew. Almark decided he would live entirely by the sword, and he soon felt proud of that.

But his father never changed his mind.

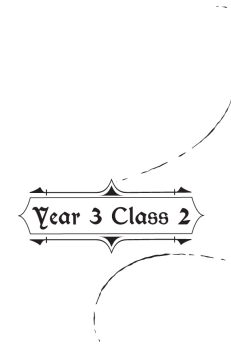
The day before Almark departed, as he listened to his father and looked into his eyes—that was the moment he gave up on being a mercenary. As much as he missed the band, Almark’s desire to live up to his father’s wishes was even stronger. He wanted Reiz, who he respected so much, to think of him as a worthy son.

Studying magic and becoming a mage were completely uncharted territory for Almark, but he didn’t want his father to think he was a coward who feared the unknown. He was the son of the brave mercenary Reiz, and he wanted to prove his father’s courage had a place in the world of mages, too. He wanted his father to take pride in him.

But during his journey south, Almark’s idea of mages changed. He saw the destructive spells used by mages in the North, and how they were but a sliver of what magic had to offer. In the South, magic was used extensively; it was ingrained in daily life. That made Almark want to use Southern magic, too, and bring it back to the North. And that was his own wish, independent of what his father wanted for him.

Almark left the dorm at Zeid's urging, and the two of them hurried to the schoolhouse. His robes felt fresh and new.

I'll do it, thought Almark. *I will become a mage.*



Almark had walked down the path to the schoolhouse with Zeid just the day before, but it looked completely different under the bright morning sunlight. It felt like a symbol of the hope awaiting him in this life, brought to shape at the end of this literal road.

"Excited, are you?" Zeid asked, walking ahead of Almark.

"It's my first time going to school."

"Yeah." Zeid turned around to look at him and nodded. "Must be exciting."

But Almark noticed the guard's expression was very stiff. "Is something wrong?" he asked.

Zeid appeared surprised at Almark's question. "Hm? What do you mean?"

"You look like you've got something on your mind."

"Oh…" Zeid cracked a strained smile and gently slapped his cheeks. "I'm never good at hiding that stuff." He looked firmly at Almark and added, "I'll be honest, I wish I didn't have to tell you this."

"Tell me what?"

"About your father's line of work… People don't think too fondly of mercenaries in these lands."

"They…what?"

"This country hasn't seen war in a century. The only battles we know are the occasional monster attacks on the border. So Southerners have this prejudice that Northerners are barbarians who love to pick fights… Ah, I mean—!"

Seeing Almark's gaze turn hostile at the word *barbarians*, Zeid waved his hands apologetically.

“Of course, not everyone shares that belief,” Zeid added, “but that’s just what the majority tends to think. Especially when it comes to mercenaries.”

“But there were mercenary bands that came from the central plains, too.”

“That might be true, but people here in the South don’t know what things are really like in the North. Same goes for me. Southerners think Northerners kill each other just for the fun of it.”

“…”

Almark had encountered such opinions on numerous occasions during his journey through the South. In Southerners’ eyes, war had nothing to do with them; it was only for uncultured barbarian brutes.

And he had to admit, it must have been comforting to think that way. After all, in an ideal world, people could live their lives without having to kill one another. But agreeing with this perspective would be tantamount to denying his father’s way of life.

And Almark couldn’t do that.

“But still, I…,” Almark began. “I’m the son of Reiz the Shadow Fang, a mercenary.”

Zeid scratched his head, unsure what to do. The headmaster had given him a difficult task, indeed.

Expecting an eleven-year-old to be shrewd enough to hide his father’s profession would be asking too much. But at the same time, if he talked openly about his background, people would view him with doubt and suspicion.

And in truth, he’d be lucky if prejudice was all he had to put up with. The Norkh Institute for Magic was backed by the royal family; even if social standing or background wasn’t taken into consideration, given the current political climate and the history of prior Northerner alumni, the school was hesitant to mention that it had a student who was the son of a Northern mercenary. After all, those same Northerner graduates of the past had been of noble background, and they still had a hard time being accepted.

And in fact, when Zeid filled out Almark’s paperwork, he wrote down Reiz’s profession as “blacksmith” at Eurog’s behest.

“I understand that it’s a hard pill to swallow,” Zeid said, clearly also uncomfortable with the situation. “But if you’re going to insist

on telling the truth about your father, you might not be allowed to attend the institute."

Almark bit his lip. When choices like this were forced on him, the words his father told him the night before he left came to mind.

"Use your head, Almark. Go find your path. One that's right for you. Learn to think for yourself without relying on me."

Almark bit his lip again, harder this time.

Father… I am proud to be your son. And should anyone mock me for being a mercenary's son, I'll put them in their place. But…

Almark's harsh journey had taught him that if he let his emotions get the better of him, he'd never get what he wanted.

I'm sorry. Forgive me, Father.

"All right." Almark nodded. "I'll keep my father's work a secret."

Seeing the boy's serene expression, Zeid frowned in unease. "Yeah? Thank you. We appreciate it," he said, looking apologetic.

Near the entrance to the schoolhouse, a woman in a bright green robe waited for them.

"Oh, this here is Professor Fia, your homeroom teacher," Zeid said. "Lucky you. Mmgh."

Zeid swayed on the spot with jealousy, prompting Almark to inch away from him.

The homeroom teacher smiled warmly. "It's nice to meet you. Almark, right?"

"Yes." Almark nodded. "It's nice to meet you, too."

"Right then, Professor Fia. I'm leaving him in your very capable hands." Zeid bowed his head behind Almark.

"Oh, yes. Thank you, Zeid," said Fia.

"Not at all. Now then, Almark—should you have any questions, please don't hesitate to ask. You can always find me by the front gate."

"Right. Thank you for everything." Almark shook Zeid's hand.

"Now, let's go. The classroom is this way."

At Fia's urging, Almark entered the schoolhouse.

As she led him to class, Fia gave him a concise explanation of the three-year-long elementary division. It was divided into three classes of fifteen students. Elementary students received a general education while also studying the basics of magical technique.

"Third-years can already use magic to some extent, even if they're

very basic spells. But you don't need to worry; the headmaster tells me you have spectacular talent for magic, so I'm sure you'll get the hang of spellcasting soon enough. Until then, take your time and get settled in."

Almark nodded obediently.

"We currently have fifteen students in the class, so someone always ended up without a partner whenever we had to pair up. But now we'll have sixteen," Fia said with a smile. She stopped before a door in the third-floor hall. "This is the classroom. Go on."

She opened the door, inviting him in. It was a simple classroom, with bright sunlight streaming in through the window.

As Almark walked into the classroom, fifteen students watched him with curiosity. Almark was already used to being in front of a crowd. During his travels through the central plains, he had joined a troupe of traveling entertainers and swung his sword about as some kind of fencer boy wonder. Now he stood beside Fia as she took her spot atop the teacher's podium and looked around the classroom, taking in each student's face.

Leila, whom he met that morning, was there. He soon found his own seat, an empty desk and chair in the far right corner of the classroom. His eyes then met those of the girl occupying the adjacent seat. She flashed a graceful but friendly smile at Almark that left quite an impression on him. This girl had a strange charm to her. Recalling Leila's demeanor that morning, Almark pondered if she was a noble's daughter, too. Incidentally, Leila was sitting in the window-side seat and was casting her gaze out the window in a bored manner.

"This is Almark," said Fia. "He'll be our sixteenth student starting today."

Leila's eyes moved from the window and raked over Almark. At Fia's urging, Almark introduced himself.

"I'm Almark, from the Alneti Kingdom."

He gave the name of the country the Black Wolf Riders happened to be in when he was born. From that perspective, saying this was his country of origin wasn't altogether a lie.

"I'm not familiar at all with this institute, or this island, or even mages, really. I hope you all can be patient with me."

He bowed his head, which was met with louder applause than he

expected.

Not too bad, he thought.

"For family reasons, Almark had to join the institute two years late. There's a lot he doesn't know, so everyone, please be there for him if he needs help," Fia told the class. "Hmm, Almark, your seat should be…"

"Over here, Professor!" The girl whose gaze he met earlier raised a hand.

Fia nodded slightly. "Next to Wendy. Take your seat, Almark."

"Yes, Professor."

Almark gave the girl, Wendy, his regards and settled into his seat. Wendy replied in kind, still smiling.

With the start of first period, Fia began to teach them about world history. Since Almark didn't have his books yet, Wendy shared hers with him from her seat.

The book detailed the Major Quartet that created the world, the Median Octet that populated it, and the Minor Sixteen created as their servants. This was all new to Almark, and he had no idea how all of this was related to magic. And so, first period came to an end with Almark frowning in confusion. He definitely needed someone to explain this to him later.

But then, he saw a shadow cast over his desk. He looked up to see expectant faces peering at him. Almost half of the class had flocked around his desk, all curious to learn more about their unusual new classmate. They started bombarding him with questions.

"I've never heard of the Alneti Kingdom. Where is it?"

"You've got no surname, right? Then you must be a commoner. What does your father do?"

"Why'd you start at the institute two years late?"

Almark patiently answered their questions one by one.

"The Alneti Kingdom is one of the countries in the North," he said, and the students blinked in confusion.

"The North?" one chubby student asked. "How far north?"

"Around the Foretta Kingdom?" another student chimed in.

"No, further north," Almark said.

"But if you go further north from the Foretta Kingdom, you cross the border of the central plains…"

"Right."

“So you’re from past the Menoba Strait?”

Almark nodded, and the students started muttering nervously.

“When he said north, he really meant the North…”

Almark prepared himself emotionally for them to start acting distant, but they were more laid-back than he expected and simply chatted about how the lands north of the central plains were really far away, and didn’t make any more remarks.

Almark then said his father was a traveling blacksmith and that he was late to enter the institute because he was with his father in a faraway country. A student asked him what his father made, and Almark answered “swords” without overthinking it. This was met with incredulous expressions, as the students didn’t know swords were used enough to have that much demand. This made it painfully clear just how different things here were compared to the North.

“So how did you come to the institute? Who brought you here?” a talkative freckled girl asked him, to which Almark responded he came on his own. This made the students once again mutter in shock. Wendy, too, looked at him with eyes wide with surprise.

“On your own? From that far away? How?” the freckled girl asked.

Almark smiled at her. “Yeah. Uh, well, I managed.”

After this, he decided this was enough questions for the time being. He got the impression that if he ended up answering too many, they’d notice the holes in his story.

“Tell me about yourselves, too,” Almark said, surveying the nearby students.

Wendy got up from her seat next to him. “Since we’re neighbors, I’ll introduce you to everyone. Okay, first…”

With a smile, Wendy told Almark about the students one by one.

There was Morgan, a chubby, friendly boy who was the son of a lumberjack from a village in western Garai Kingdom; Nelson, a boy with a nimble body and a strong-willed face, who was the son of a knight’s attendant from the Myx Duchy, which bordered the Garai Kingdom; Lilty, a dainty, almost fragile-looking girl whose parents were musicians in the royal conservatory of the Foretta Kingdom, a large country in the central plains; and Norish, the talkative, freckled girl, who came from a farmer family in the Lang Duchy, a

small country in the South.

After Wendy introduced everyone, Morgan motioned at her next. “And this is Wendy. Wendy Baherb. She’s the daughter of House Baherb, a major noble family from the Garai Kingdom.”

Wendy frowned. “You’re making it sound bigger than it is.”

“There’s also a few other people…,” Morgan added, but then someone called out to them from behind.

“Hey, you guys!”

It was a stocky, stern-faced boy, followed by two similarly large boys. They all glared at Almark and his peers.

“How long are you going to make a fuss? Let’s get moving,” the first boy urged, his tone hostile.

Almark tried to answer him, but Morgan hurriedly waved a hand and cut him off. “You’re better off not saying anything.”

“Tohrk, we were just introducing everyone to the new student, Almark,” Wendy said.

The large boy, Tohrk, scowled at her. “Wendy, you can go ahead and keep being everyone’s friend if you want, but don’t cause us nobles trouble. Got it?”

“That wasn’t my intention…”

“The longer you spend grouping up around the new kid and dawdling, the longer we have to wait for our next class. Right?”

Tohrk narrowed his eyes, scowling at the students surrounding Almark’s desk. The students hung their heads to escape his glare and, one by one, stepped away from Almark.

“Is our next class somewhere else?” Almark asked.

He didn’t sound flustered at all, which earned him an annoyed tongue click from Tohrk.

“Next we have a practical magic lesson,” Wendy said gently, regaining her composure. “So we need to move to the magic training area.”

“Practical magic?”

They had a lesson like this right away? Almark felt his heart racing. Seeing his reaction, Tohrk scoffed at him and smirked.

“Hey, new kid, since you came here two years late, I’m guessing you can already use magic, right? We’re not here to babysit an amateur.”

“Huh?” Almark raised his eyebrows.

Tohrk heaved a dramatic sigh. “I’m asking if you learned a spell or two on your own.”

Tohrk’s two cronies, who were standing behind him, laughed.

“No,” Almark replied. “I can’t use any spells yet.”

“Gee, this bodes well.” Tohrk shook his head with a very exaggerated grimace. “Another commoner in our class, huh? And this one looks like he’s nothing but dead weight. Classes 1 and 3 are going to make a laughingstock out of us…”

Tohrk and his two comrades threw back their shoulders and walked off. Almark watched them go, stunned.

He turned to Morgan, who was still nearby. “Who was that?” Almark asked.

“Tohrk Shifei,” Morgan answered after making sure the trio was far enough away to be out of earshot. “He’s from the Garai Kingdom, like me. Except I’m a commoner and he’s a noble’s son. Commoners and nobles have equal status here at the institute, but Tohrk always flaunts his family’s name. He’s good at martial arts and magic, though, so we can’t say anything back.” Morgan sighed, his pudgy body deflating slightly.

“So we have martial arts class…?”

“Yeah, it’s one of our enrichment subjects, so we have to take it. I’m bad at it, though. But Tohrk is the second-best martial arts student in our class.”

“Second-best?”

Almark recalled Tohrk’s physique. He was much larger than most boys their age, and yet he was just second-best at martial arts.

“Who’s the best student, then?” Almark asked Morgan.

“The class representative, Wollis. He’s on a whole other level. Anyway, let’s get going.”

At Morgan’s urging, Almark rose from his seat.

To get to the magic training area, they had to cross a connecting corridor. Their destination was a large stone building with a ceiling as tall as the hall’s, and inside it was a large, spacious room. It didn’t feel the slightest bit open, however, since all the windows were covered by black curtains.

With nothing but lamplight to illuminate the room, Almark and the other students lined up and waited for the teacher. Everyone

else seemed fairly relaxed and chatted among themselves. Almark stood at the back of the line, but he could see Tohrk and his cronies turn around and start whispering about something.

Before long, a very skinny, pale-faced teacher walked in. Unlike Fia, he wore a gray cloak.

"…Let's begin," he announced. "Everyone, start by producing light with your mana instead of your staff."

As the teacher talked, the lamps went out, enveloping the room in darkness save for a few scant rays of sunshine that had evaded the curtains. The atmosphere in the room changed immediately as all the boisterous chatter from a moment before turned to silence. The only thing Almark could hear was the sound of deep breathing.

Almark held his breath and observed what was happening. Within moments, he heard several puffs, and small flames sprang to life in the students' hands.

They're magic lights, Almark thought.

He'd seen a mage use this kind of spell a number of times during his travels. Said mage wasn't an alumnus of the institute, but they'd had a lot of combat experience. Except…

When he realized the difference, Almark's eyes widened. Compared to the light the mage produced, the flames in the students' hands were much more delicate. The traveling mage's flame looked like an extension of a campfire. It flickered when the wind blew on it, with the flame growing or shrinking accordingly. But the students' flames remained at a fixed size, floating just off the surface of their palms. It felt like these eleven-year-olds had more advanced technique than a mage who was many years their elder.

It was then that Almark realized, albeit belatedly, that these weren't typical children. Each and every one of them had enough talent to be allowed into this institute. They were prodigies when it came to magic.

The thin, bony teacher walked through the students, wordlessly checking their flames. He occasionally muttered something to a student, probably advice about magic. When he walked past Almark, he stopped in his tracks, noticing he hadn't produced anything in his hands.

"…Oh, you must be…," the teacher whispered, nodding. "I've

been filled in about you. Come to me after classes are over. I'll give you some supplementary lessons."

Hesitant to speak up, Almark merely nodded in response.

"Good, you all can stop," the teacher told the class.

He clapped, and the students' flames went out. At the same time, the lights came back on. Apparently they were controlled by magic.

"Nice concentration, everyone. Or maybe you wished to avoid making fools of yourselves in front of the new student…" A thin smile crept over the teacher's lips.

Under the lamplight, Almark could see how the other students were faring. Some looked unaffected, while others were sweating heavily. Morgan was gasping for air.

"Next, we'll practice with staves. Everyone, go pick one up," the teacher said, pointing at a wooden crate in the corner of the room.

The students walked over right away, and Almark followed. Sitting in the crates were dozens of staves, each reaching up to about Almark's waist.

"They're training staves," Wendy—who had sidled up to him at some point— whispered into his ear.

"What do we do next?" Almark asked in a whisper.

Wendy handed him a staff. "It'll probably be wind or stone cleaving. Depends on what Professor Illmis wants."

And when the students all returned, staves in hand, Wendy's prediction proved true.

"We'll be doing stone cleaving today, so prepare your stones," the teacher instructed.

The students walked over to another wooden crate, picked up flat, palm-sized stones, and returned to their positions. Almark had seen a stone cleaving spell during a street performance in the central plains once. An old man who looked very weak and frail tapped on a hard stone a few times with his wooden staff, after which the stone split in two. The first time he saw it, Almark didn't know it was magic and assumed it must have been some trick or sleight of hand.

"Good. Begin."

At the teacher's cue, the students started tapping their staves against the stones. Unlike the earlier spell, this exercise really displayed the differences in the students' abilities. Wendy was the

first to succeed, her stone splitting with a dry sound. Then, Tohrk did it, with Leila succeeding at exactly the same time. The other students succeeded one by one, but some of them accidently chipped their stone. Morgan and Norish seemed to be having a hard time, though.

After half of the students finished cleaving their stones, they waited for the other half to finish. Some of them tried to split their stones further, or just did nothing and chatted. But among them, Almark noticed one boy who looked strange.

This student looked like he hadn't successfully split his stone yet, and still had his staff aimed at the stone in his hand, but the way he handled the staff was off. Rather than tapping the stone like the rest of the students had, he was slowly tracing its surface.

What is he doing?

Almark looked carefully and saw a complex geometrical pattern surface on the rock.

He's carving that pattern into the rock…!

The boy carefully adjusted the amount of mana he invested into splitting the rock, continually outputting a measured amount of force. Just splitting the rock looked like it took great effort, but he was freely controlling his mana to painstakingly carve that pattern. It wasn't that he couldn't split it; he had voluntarily challenged himself with an even more advanced task.

"I see you're working hard, Wollis," the teacher told the student in passing.

The student looked up at him and smiled. He had long, golden hair and a face that even in the dark was clearly handsome. This must have been the class representative Wollis whom Morgan mentioned earlier.

Wollis was speaking to the teacher with a calm smile, but when he noticed Almark was watching him and their gazes met, he suddenly narrowed his eyes. Almark got the sense that there was something more behind the look on Wollis's face.

"Hey, new kid," a voice suddenly called out beside Almark.

Almark turned to see a tall, large student standing there. Tohrk.

"You've got a staff and stone. Why aren't you doing the exercise?" Tohrk asked with a sneer.

"It's just, I don't know how—"

“I’ll teach you.”

Almark stared into Tohrk’s eyes, and Tohrk haughtily met his gaze with a provocative smile. Almark nodded.

“Good,” said Tohrk. “It’s easy enough. First, close your eyes and take a deep breath. Sense the mana within your body.”

“Sense my mana?” Almark looked up at Tohrk. “How?”

“You can’t even do that?” Tohrk snickered. “What, don’t you have mana in your body?”

“Huh.” Almark cocked his head. “I dunno.”

“I hope you don’t,” Tohrk whispered, his expression darkening. “That way you’ll be out of here without causing any trouble.”

Almark frowned at the explicit animosity to the boy’s words. Tohrk then continued his explanation, hiding his enmity with an animalistic grin.

“I don’t know if you’ve got mana in you, but if you do, you should be able to sense it. Envision your mana focused at the tip of your staff.” Tohrk tapped the floor with his own staff. “Then breathe out sharply and imagine your mana passing through the other side of the stone, and that’s when you take your staff…”

He hit the stone in front of Almark with the tip of his staff. Apparently he wasn’t trying to split it, only poking it hard without using any mana. The staff produced a dull sound when it made contact with the stone.

“Understand? It’s simple.” Tohrk peered into Almark’s eyes with a taunting smile. “Try it.”

Almark nodded.

This was a good opportunity. He couldn’t say he liked the person teaching him, but the method he described didn’t sound wrong. And he was bored of just watching.

I’ll give it a shot.

Almark followed Tohrk’s instructions, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath.

The mana within me…

He couldn’t imagine what that felt like, and Tohrk didn’t seem inclined to explain it. Almark tried to imagine it as a second bloodstream circulating through his body and tried to focus it in his hands, gripping the staff before directing the mana to the tip of the staff. That felt like the right way to go about it.

Okay. Now.

With the image solidly in his mind, Almark breathed out and tapped the stone with his staff.

He heard a hollow sound.

Opening his eyes, he saw the stone was completely unchanged. Not a fragment of it had chipped off. Tohrk, who had watched him in silence, could no longer hold back his laughter.

"Keh-heh-heh, w-wow, you're hopeless. I've never seen someone fail to even chip their stone. You've got absolutely no talent." Laughing, Tohrk patted Almark roughly on the shoulder and whispered into his ear, "You came all this way and you'll probably just leave after one year without getting to the intermediate division. Might as well quit while you're ahead, you know?" He then added in a low growl, "You're dragging everyone else down."

"You really seem to have it out for me for some reason."

"Huh?" Tohrk looked back in surprise at Almark, who was utterly undaunted, and scowled. "What did you just say?"

"Why are you so hostile toward me?" Almark asked calmly. "Is it because you're a noble and I'm not?"

"Ha!" Tohrk scoffed at him, the scorn clear in his voice. "Yeah, that's part of it. I don't like having more nobodies like you who crawled out of the boonies in our school. You're an eyesore."

"An eyesore," Almark repeated. He nodded and fixed his grip on his staff, tapping it a few more times stubbornly. "Are you and me really all that different?"

"What?" Tohrk stared at him. This was something a Southerner would never say. "Did you just ask if we're different?" Tohrk instantly puffed up arrogantly. "Of course we're different. How can a total nobody like you match me? I'm Tohrk of House Shifei."

"Is that—?" Almark started, preparing to ask if that was supposed to be impressive, but Tohrk cut him off.

"For starters, are you even trying to become a mage? You came two years late and trying to cut corners. Because of 'family reasons,' was it?" Tohrk said in a poor imitation of Fia. He scowled. "We've all got family reasons of our own, but we still started here at age nine. And then you get to come two years later than the rest of us. What, was leaving your mommy and daddy that hard for you?"

"Yeah," Almark said, reminded of the morning when he said

goodbye to Reiz. “It was hard.”

Tohrk scoffed at him again. “Well, life isn’t easy enough to baby kids like you. Mark my words, you’ll flunk out and leave before long.” He then looked at Almark angrily. “And personally, I think you’ll just be wasting my and everyone else’s time until you do.”

Having said his piece, Tohrk turned around and went back to his spot.

…*I really thought I could break that stone*, thought Almark.

He prodded the stone with his staff a few more times before finally giving up.

Well, it was my first time.

This made sense to him. Tohrk’s taunts and intimidations didn’t faze him at all. Compared to the profanities that flew around the battlefields of the North, he was almost outright polite. And he did teach Almark how to do stone cleaving, so Almark should probably have thanked him, but he got the feeling Tohrk didn’t much want his gratitude.

When the last remaining student, Norish, finally split her stone after being covered in sweat from effort, the class ended.

As the students prepared to leave, Almark said to Wendy, “Everyone’s so impressive. I’ve never seen such precise magic up close like this.”

“Really? I’m sure you’ll be able to do all this soon, Almark,” Wendy replied happily. “Professor Illmis told you to stop by after class, right? Don’t hesitate to ask me if you need help.”

“Me, too! I’ll help, too!” Morgan, who had run up to them from behind, called out.

“Thanks, you two. I’ll work hard to catch up to everyone.” Almark smiled gratefully.

But when the students left, and the training area was completely emptied, a dry *snap* filled the room. The last stone Almark poked, sitting inside the wooden crate along with all the others, suddenly cracked around the spot where he tapped it. The crack spread, and the stone split into two halves that rolled away.

Having lunch with so many students was a new and unfamiliar experience for Almark; he cleared his plate so quickly Morgan and the others ended up laughing at him. *I should learn to relish the taste of my food*, Almark noted.

Everything in his afternoon classes was similarly new to him. Instead of focusing on following along with the class, he was desperately trying to keep track of what he was supposed to be doing and paying attention to.

Having somehow finished the school day, Almark said goodbye to his classmates and returned to the magic training area alone. He pushed the doors open and entered to find the skinny teacher from his morning class already waiting.

"Professor Illmis?"

"You've arrived," Illmis said, nodding. "But it's too soon for you to train here. Let's go somewhere else."

Almark followed Illmis outside. Even under the setting sun, Illmis's face looked terribly pallid. They crossed the outside corridor back into the schoolhouse and entered a small, unoccupied classroom.

The moment Almark settled into a seat, Illmis said, "Now, Almark, let me ask you something."

"Sure."

"Are staves necessary for using magic?" Illmis directed a probing look at Almark's face. "What do you think?"

Almark paused for a moment. "All mages use staves, so I imagine they must be necessary, right?"

"I see." Illmis nodded, and without addressing Almark's answer,

moved on to the next question. “Do you think wearing a robe is necessary for using magic, then?”

“…Well, all mages wear robes. Both you professors and us students. That’s probably because we need to, right?”

“Hm.” Illmis nodded one more time. “You’ve seen mages before, haven’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

Almark nearly said “on the battlefield” but stopped himself at the last second.

“On my way to the institute.”

“Then you know what mages are.”

“Yes.” Almark nodded, and Illmis did the same.

“I understand perfectly, Almark,” he said gravely. “In which case, I want you to take today, and this lesson, as a chance to forget everything you know about mages.”

“H-huh?” Almark stammered, surprised.

“The things you’ve seen and come to believe have to do with a mage’s outward appearance; they’re all surface level embellishments. Do you know what other name mages answer to?”

“…Those who wield unseen power.”

“Correct.” Illmis nodded. “The essence of a mage isn’t in how they look. A staff, a robe—those don’t make a mage. A mage’s essence, much like the power we wield, lies somewhere invisible to the naked eye.”

“Somewhere invisible…”

“I would guess that not many mages have realized that fact. But since you’re a student here, you must at least grasp the concept. That’s where your studies start. The magic I will teach you here will cover a great deal of ground. But once you acquire it, you won’t need staves or robes anymore.”

“Then, why—?”

Almark tried to ask why everyone used robes and staves, but Illmis calmly stopped him.

“You’re a smart boy. You’ve learned much from what you saw and heard. Explaining the answer to your question would be easy. But you’re too intelligent for that; answering would get in the way of you truly understanding the reason.”

Illmis then instructed Almark to close his eyes.

"All magic begins with meditation. You must start by firmly sensing the mana inhabiting your body. The elementary students have spent every day at the institute meditating to properly harness their mana. It takes time. But you're a third-year—you haven't much time left as an elementary student. The headmaster spoke of your great talent and potential, and I expect much of you. Now, let's begin…"

That day, Illmis stayed at Almark's side and watched over his meditation until the sun set.

By the time Almark said goodbye to Illmis and left the schoolhouse, it was already dark out. It was only his second time going back from the schoolhouse to the dorm, but thankfully it was a single straight path. There were some branches in the road, but overall, there was no getting lost.

As Almark walked back, he spotted someone running toward him.

"Oh, there he is. Almark!"

It was Morgan and Nelson.

"Hey. Is something wrong?" Almark asked.

"Oh, you hadn't come back to the dorm yet, and Wendy was worried you might have gotten lost, so we were waiting for you," Morgan said. "She and the others were here, too, but Lilty gets scared when it's dark, so Wendy took her back to the girls' dorm. Everyone wanted to give you their regards."

"Really? Thanks, guys. I'm sorry I kept you waiting."

"We like to hang out after class and do stuff like practice or go into the forest. Whenever we get the chance, I mean," Nelson said, his tone a bit curt, but friendly.

"Let's head back. I'm starving," Morgan urged.

Almark nodded and walked alongside them. On the way there, the two of them told Almark about the institute and themselves. Almark still had trouble matching names to each of their faces, much to his shame. He told himself he needed to remember them faster.

That night, when he was all alone in his room, Almark tried the meditation technique Illmis taught him. Sensing the mana within one's body—the basis of all magic. At noon, he had imagined it as

another stream of blood flowing through him, but now he instinctively imagined it as a clump of water sitting at his core. He couldn't tell if this image was correct, and Illmis told him he wasn't at the phase when he should be asking for right or wrong answers.

It reminded him of his lonely journey to the institute, where he learned how to converse with himself under the night sky. It was much the same.

And so, Almark meditated tirelessly.

The next morning, Almark's busy routine began.

He focused intensely on the difficult, incomprehensible lessons. Whenever he didn't know something, Wendy kindly filled him in from the seat next to his. He couldn't rely on her all the time, though, so he started going to the library next to the schoolhouse and studying on his own.

After classes, he meditated under Illmis's watch. Sometimes Illmis stayed with him the whole time, and others he simply gave a few words of advice and left.

Wendy and his other friends offered to help, but since Almark was still only in the meditating phase, there wasn't much they could assist him with. Besides, they had their own things to do after class. So, while Almark was grateful for the offer, he turned them down, promising that when the time was right, he'd come to them for help.

The days passed by swiftly under this grueling schedule. In the institute, students were given a day off every ten days or so. However, something happened the day before Almark's first day off.

He was in practical magic class. The students lined up in the magic training area, awaiting the teacher. Illmis walked in, and class started.

They began with an illumination spell. Everyone lit a flame in their hands, producing a clear, gentle light.

So far, Almark had spent practical magic classes simply watching his peers and meditating while they were busy practicing spells. Illmis had only taught him how to meditate, but Almark narrowed down the professor's advice to the core of magic: imagery. Through

imagery, he was able to convert his mana into other shapes, other forms of power. That was likely what Illmis was trying to impart to him.

In which case, an illumination spell involved taking the mana within him and manifesting it as a small flame atop his hand. As he meditated, Almark held out his right hand and imagined a flame igniting within it.

A flame. A small flame.

He focused on that image, but his hand remained empty.

No good. It's not working. Almark opened his eyes.

The class had moved to the next spell. They were practicing wind magic by blowing wind around their staffs. Neither an offensive nor destructive spell, this one simply produced a pleasant breeze. The students would then increase the intensity of the wind until it was capable of rattling tree branches.

Almark observed that each student had types of magic they were proficient or weak at. Norish, who'd struggled so much at cleaving a stone, was practically glowing when she produced a pleasant breeze. Tohrk, on the other hand, got a warning from Illmis when he accidentally produced a powerful gust of wind.

Wendy and Leila used both types of magic proficiently. Their personalities seemed to be the opposite of each other, but they were a close match when it came to their talent in magic. Morgan had a hard time with the wind spell, struggling to keep the intensity of his wind stable.

Much like with stone cleaving, each student was wildly different when it came to their use of mana and the strength of their image. That was Almark's conclusion as he watched his classmates.

Almark wondered how Wollis was faring. He looked around the class, keeping his eyes peeled for a head of blond hair. The class representative had yet to say a word to Almark, let alone introduce himself. Almark had considered taking the initiative himself, but each time he tried, Wollis would walk away somewhere. Almark got the impression the boy was avoiding him.

But it didn't look like Wollis was typically cold to people. Other classmates seemed to rely on and look up to him. Wendy had even told Almark to "go to Wollis for help if you need something."

Morgan once told Almark that Wollis was a noble's son, but

Almark never asked for his surname. He was so busy just keeping up with his classes that he couldn't pay much attention to what the other students were doing. And so, he'd still never spoken to Wollis.

Almark noticed that Wollis was doing something different from what the other students in class were practicing, but he couldn't tell what it was.

He then went to a corner out of the way of everyone's wind spells, put his staff on the floor, and closed his eyes.

He tried to do the illumination spell from earlier again. Ever since he had started practicing meditation, his mental images had grown clearer and clearer. He could now tangibly imagine the mana flowing through him.

Almark held his right hand up and focused on the image of a small flame sitting between his palm and the air. He gathered the mana circulating through him in his right hand, trying to materialize it as a small flame. And then, to hold that flame in place, so it wouldn't go out…

Crackle.

A small flame popped up above Almark's hand. It wavered unsteadily, faintly, but a small ball of flame was undoubtedly glowing on his palm.

"I did it… It worked."

All the meditation he'd done for days must have paid off. He'd pulled it off faster than he expected. Almark looked up, searching for Illmis, but he was giving advice to another student and wasn't looking in his direction.

I cast my first spell.

Almark gazed tenderly at the small flame.

But suddenly, the flame wavered violently. Almark felt like the flame in his palm was stirring maliciously, like all the mana in his body was being sucked up into the flame.

Huh? What's going on…?

The instant Almark grew flustered, the flame in his hand exploded in size, forming a pillar of flame that shot up to the ceiling. Almark shouted with surprise from the sudden change, but he couldn't see anything beyond the growing fire.

Norish and Lilty screamed. Tohrk shouted angrily. Almark heard Wendy call his name, her voice pained. But amid all the fuss,

Illmis's voice alone reached Almark's ears with strange clarity.

"I told you, didn't I?"

Feeling as if every bit of strength had been squeezed out of his body, Almark fell unconscious.

When Almark came to, he was in the schoolhouse infirmary.

He sat up and looked around. He wasn't in any pain, and examining his right hand, there weren't any burns on it. He looked out the window and saw the sun was still hanging high in the sky.

How long had he been out? Even during his journey, Almark had never fainted and been that defenseless. Letting your consciousness slip meant inviting death, after all.

I really messed up…

Almark sighed and held his right hand up to the window. What happened back there? The flame had surged up like it had a will of its own, and he felt like his mana was instantly drained. Almark tried to get out of bed, but a spell of dizziness overcame him. His body felt limp.

"You shouldn't walk yet," a sudden voice said.

Almark turned around in surprise. Illmis stood with his back to the wall, watching the boy. Almark was probably too drained to have noticed. He didn't have any visible wounds, but his body must have taken more damage than he realized.

"You released the majority of your mana. You should lie down for a while longer."

Illmis slowly approached Almark. Had he been there the whole time?

"Professor Illmis… What happened to me?" Almark asked, still sitting up.

"You tried to use an illumination spell, right?"

"Yes, I did."

Illmis shook his head. "That wasn't an illumination spell. It's called Dragon's Flame, a destructive bit of magic that burns one's enemies to ashes."

"Dragon's Flame… Burns the enemy to ashes…" Almark repeated the words and, recalling his classmates' screams before passing out, felt a chill run down his spine. "What happened to everyone in class?"

"…No one's hurt. The mana in your body wasn't fully manifested, so the fire burned out quickly."

"Really…? That's good…" Almark sighed in relief.

Illmis peered into his face. "Why do you think that happened?"

"…I don't know. I've been doing lots of meditation, and I thought I'd conjured a mental image of an illumination spell. I kept imagining a little flame. Not a big one, let alone one from a dragon. I wasn't trying to destroy anything, so where did this come from?"

"Dragon's Flame is a spell we recommend students learn when they're old enough for the advanced division," Illmis said. "It's not particularly complicated; even intermediate students can cast it. However…" Illmis paused for a moment. "It consumes a large amount of mana. Dragon's Flame can be life-threatening if cast by a child whose body isn't fully developed."

"Oh. So that's why…" Almark understood why he'd fainted. As the fire had surged, it consumed all his mana. "Even though I hadn't mastered meditation, I linked my mana to something really strong."

"Exactly." Illmis nodded. "I told you before, you're too smart. You instantly comprehend whatever you take in, and then you interpret and use it. But you didn't fully comprehend this spell."

"…I see."

He'd heard Illmis's voice right before losing consciousness.

"I told you, didn't I?"

This was what Illmis had meant. Almark's mental conjuring of illumination magic was one he came up with on his own, and it ended up triggering a completely different spell. Illmis was right, and Almark was ashamed that he was conceited enough to have thought he knew better.

Illmis got to his feet and prodded Almark to lie back down. "The healer, Professor Selia, will be here soon with medicine for you. Take it and then head back to the dorms once you get a bit more rest. Don't practice meditation today or tomorrow. Just convalesce in your room and try to recover your mana."

"…Yes, sir." Almark bit his lip. "I'm sorry for all the trouble, Professor."

"You have talent, that much is certain." Illmis stopped at the door and turned to look at Almark. "But colossal talent requires considerable discipline and determination to control. The other day,

I said you don't have much time left…" His tone turned serene. "I didn't say that to rush you, though. Losing patience is the one thing you must not do. However, don't just rest on your laurels, either. Stick to your training. You have power within you, and there is no reason you shouldn't be able to control it."

"…Yes, sir."

All Almark could do now was believe in his teacher's words.

Not long after Illmis left, the institute's healer, Selia, entered with a bottle of medicine. As Almark slowly downed the liquid, it felt as if every drop filled his body with mana.

"You can go back to the dorm once you can walk without getting dizzy. I think Professor Illmis already told you, but no going out today and tomorrow. Stay in your room and rest," Selia instructed before leaving.

After lying down for a while, Almark got out of bed. He didn't feel dizzy anymore, so he decided to head out. Classes were about to wrap up.

I really shocked everyone in class today… I should apologize.

Tomorrow was Almark's first day off, and Wendy and Morgan had said they'd take him to the bookshop to pick up his textbooks and show him around town. But now he'd have to cancel those plans. He was about to leave the infirmary with those thoughts on his mind when the door suddenly opened.

"Almark!" Wendy burst into the infirmary, followed by their other classmates. "Are you okay? Professor Fia said you're going straight back to the dorm today, so I got worried!"

Wendy looked at Almark up and down. She took his right hand and rubbed it in her hands. Her smooth, pale fingers felt like silk over Almark's skin.

"You're not hurt. Thank goodness." Wendy finally smiled.

"Thanks… I'm fine," Almark said sheepishly.

The other students all expressed their relief.

"Don't worry about me—I'm sorry, everyone. I couldn't control the fire and I put you all in danger." Almark hung his head, but everyone's reactions surprised him.

"Hey, it's no big deal. Stuff like that happens pretty often," Nelson said bluntly. "We couldn't control our illumination spells either, at first. Everybody kept getting burned or made huge fires. Let me tell

you, it was chaos. Right, guys?"

The rest of the kids nodded.

"Yeah. Everyone messes up. Don't let it bother you," Morgan said.

"I lit Tohrk's head on fire once…," Lilty added, and they all burst out laughing.

"Yeah, that was crazy!" Nelson clapped his hands, amused. "You look pretty timid, Lilty, but sometimes you do the weirdest things."

Once the group settled down, Norish muttered, "I've never seen someone make a flame that big, though," as if she'd just remembered.

Everyone agreed.

"Yeah, Almark, you put on the biggest fireworks show in the institute's history," Morgan said, giving him a thumbs-up encouragingly.

"Thanks. I…I thought you guys would be angry."

"Nah, we're not. Everyone makes mistakes," Nelson said.

"We cause each other trouble all the time," Wendy added. "We've gotten a lot better at it now, but back when we were first-years… Remember?"

The kids cracked bemused smiles as they recalled those days.

"So you don't have to be so stiff around us, Almark. I know Professor Illmis told you to focus on meditation right now for your supplementary classes, but if you need help, just say the word."

"Thanks."

Almark was genuinely grateful. After that, he told them it would be best to cancel tomorrow's trip. Wendy, clearly disappointed, frowned and began talking about all the shops she had wanted to show him.

"I was gonna show you this great candy store," Morgan said, looking very disappointed, too.

"You just wanted an excuse to check it out," Nelson retorted, which made Morgan go a bit red.

"That's not true! I was already gonna buy something there."

Eventually, Nelson and Morgan promised Almark they'd pick up his books for him.

Everyone then said they had business in the classroom or in the woods and left, and Almark stepped out of the infirmary, chest full of warmth. He had made some good friends, indeed, and he didn't

want to betray their feelings.

He left the schoolhouse and returned to the dorms. On the way there, he ran into Leila. She must have been headed somewhere, because she was walking with swift steps.

“Oh, Leila, I’m sorry about—” Almark started to apologize, but she silenced him with a cold glare.

“Do you have any idea what you did?” Leila asked, her voice as icy as her expression. “Throwing around power you can’t control—what are you, some kind of ape?” She shot Almark a scornful look. “Your blunder ruined our class today, you know.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I don’t have time for this,” Leila spat, her voice trembling with cold anger. “Please. Don’t ruin my lessons anymore.”

Having said her piece, Leila walked away.

The next day, as Almark spent what should have been a beautiful day off recovering in bed, there was a knock on the door.

"Yes?"

The door opened, and through it stepped Wendy, a small pile of books in her arms.

"Almark, I heard you have to stay in your room today, so I figured we could go over the material together."

"Oh… You're sure? I mean, it's your day off, Wendy," Almark pointed out, surprised.

Wendy waved a hand dismissively and said it was fine. Almark decided to take her up on that kind offer and have her look over his work.

The two moved to the dorms' common area and started studying. She was clearly a dedicated student—whenever he asked about something, she always had an answer at the ready. Although Almark wasn't sure if this was because Wendy really was that smart, or if his questions were just very basic.

After a quick break for lunch in the dining hall, the two resumed their study session.

Wendy patiently helped Almark until sunset, at which point she closed the book, and they spent their remaining free time chatting. She told him all sorts of things about the institute, and when she finally ran out of things to say, Almark asked her a question that had been on his mind for a while.

"Wendy, why are you being so nice to me?"

He genuinely wanted to know. Wendy was being much too nice—far nicer than he would expect from someone who just sat next to

him in class.

"Oh, well…," Wendy muttered, looking a bit flustered. "I mean, you just joined the institute and you don't know anything yet, right?"

"Yeah, that's true, but…"

Even so, that didn't mean she had to go to the trouble of being this kind to him. She had just spent her day off helping Almark catch up with his studies. This wasn't normal.

"…it makes me feel kind of guilty."

"Don't be! I'm doing this because I want to," Wendy insisted, but she saw that Almark wasn't convinced. "Hey, remember your first day here? Well, I kind of got the feeling Tohrk zeroed in on you right away because of us."

"…Oh." Almark nodded, recalling how Tohrk came over to his desk to scare away the students who had gathered there.

"I know it's going to be hard enough to get used to life here anyway," Wendy said apologetically. "So I talked about it with everyone, and we decided we'll do what we can to protect you."

"Protect me." Almark's eyes widened at this unexpected answer. "You want to protect…me?"

This girl is going to keep me safe? I can do that myself just fine.

That struck him as the most natural thing to do. It was different back when he was in the mercenary group and surrounded by comrades, but through his long, harsh journey southward, Almark had always ensured his own safety. Had he been incapable of that, not only would he not have made it to the institute, but he would have died before he even crossed the Menoba Strait.

I see. Almark felt his lips naturally curl into a smile. *To these kids, I'm someone who needs protecting.*

Their concern was of course entirely uncalled for, but the fact they felt this way was by no means unpleasant. If anything, it made him feel a little embarrassed, in a warm, ticklish sort of way.

"Thanks, Wendy," Almark said. "I know I'm not the most reliable person here, but I really don't need any protection. Don't worry. I can look after myself."

"Yeah…" Wendy nodded, looking a bit bothered. "I didn't mean to say you're unreliable or anything."

"It's fine. I appreciate the fact you care so much." Almark smiled.

“And after what happened yesterday, I really did cause you guys a lot of trouble.”

Wendy looked relieved.

“Oh, but that said, there’s something I wanted to ask.” Almark returned to his usual expression and looked at Wendy. “Why is Tohrk so hostile toward me?”

“Oh… Hm. Well, Tohrk is…” Wendy wavered, unsure how to explain. She hung her head, thinking it over, before eventually working up the courage to say, “Almark, what do you think about our class?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, some of us have surnames, and some don’t, right?”

“Yeah…”

Almark picked up on what she was implying. Their class had four children with surnames—in other words, nobles. Wendy, Tohrk, Leila, and Wollis. All the other students, including Tohrk’s two flunkies, were students *without* surnames. Commoners.

“Classes 1 and 3 have more kids with surnames—about half the students. So Tohrk doesn’t like that he got placed in the class for commoners.”

“But I thought the institute doesn’t care if you’re…”

Whether one was a noble or a commoner didn’t matter when it came to being admitted. Everyone was given an equal chance at an education. The only ones that were formally barred from entering were the children of Northern mercenaries.

“Right, it doesn’t matter. Outside the institute, yes, things can be different, but here the professors don’t discriminate based on status. And I think that’s the right thing to do, but some people don’t. There are people who think that children with surnames are more talented than those without, and that the institute should be a school only for students with surnames.”

“…Well, the four of you are at the top of the class,” Almark noted.

Whether it was a difference in talent or a matter of pride, several factors in the class contributed to the perception that noble children were superior.

Wendy nodded and bit her lip. “Tohrk is especially bad about social status. He’s always been headstrong and never minces

words… Kids without surnames end up fearing those who do, and have to walk on eggshells around them. I don't like that. Social status has no bearing on the power of magic."

Wendy's words caught Almark by surprise. He didn't expect the "power of magic" to come up. That struck him as fascinating.

Right… The power of magic is impartial.

"I want to change things in our class." Wendy looked at Almark with a stiff expression. "I've always felt this way, and I can't do it on my own. But when you came along, Almark…" She paused and smiled, like she'd just remembered something. "It's your first time here. You don't know anyone and you don't know magic, but none of it scares you. You don't seem bothered at all. Remember the way you looked at the whole class? You were so confident, so direct, and you looked me straight in the eye."

"Yeah…" Almark nodded. He recalled how Wendy smiled when his gaze met hers.

"When that happened, you know what I thought? I thought, 'We've got this really amazing new student. And maybe he can change things in this class…' I realize I was making a lot of assumptions." Wendy hung her head bashfully, tears in her eyes. "So I wanted to help you become part of the class, in whatever little ways I can… I'm sorry. That sounded really weird, didn't it?" Before he could respond, she added, "Oh, I feel like I made Tohrk sound worse than he is. He has his good sides, despite everything else."

Almark couldn't deny it was a little weird. He didn't intend to change the class at all, and honestly it took all he had just to keep up with everyone. But seeing Wendy hide her flushed face, he was struck with an emotion he'd never felt before.

For one brief moment, a pained throbbing filled his heart. It confused him. And in his surprise, he interpreted that new feeling as a similar emotion he knew better: gratitude. This girl had done so much for him, after all.

I'm grateful to her. I should repay her for everything.

Gratitude—the word felt overblown, but it filled Almark with an odd familiarity, like the cold winds of the North blew over him.

"If you're not gonna repay your debts of gratitude, you've got no business being a mercenary."

The gruff spirit of the Northern mercenaries' chivalry crossed his

mind after many days of not having heard them.

"Getting started is the most important part of a battle."

He could hear his father's voice saying, *"Don't be the kind of guy who makes women cry. If you need to cheer someone up, give 'em a hearty slap first."*

Almark nodded to himself. *Yes, Father. You're right. I'm your son—the son of a Northern mercenary.*

"Wendy, we've got martial arts class tomorrow, right?"

"Huh?" Wendy blinked, surprised by Almark's question that came out of nowhere. "Yes, we do."

"I see."

"This will be your first martial arts class, won't it?"

You don't have to treat me with kid gloves, Wendy, Almark thought, his body brimming with the fierce strength he was so used to wielding.

"You can treat me like everyone else."

It'll remind me of how things were back then.

Noticing the gruff smile on Almark's lips, Wendy blinked, like she'd just seen something she shouldn't have.

"Tomorrow I'll thank you for all the help you've given me," Almark said, the usual kindness returning to his smile.

The martial arts training area was a vast arena beneath a dome, with dry soil as its floor. Almark had seen arenas like this in his travels, and while this one was much smaller, it did have spectator seats, including some fancy ones for nobles.

"I didn't expect such a fancy martial arts facility in a school for magic," Almark commented, surprised. He turned to face Wendy, who nodded.

"Impressive, isn't it? We have a martial arts tournament here once a year, and a lot of visitors come to watch, including the king of Garai," she told him.

"So we have to fight in front of the king?"

"Yes, and winning is a really big honor." Unlike her teary-eyed display the day prior, Wendy was back to her usual cheerful attitude. "Only third-years participate from the elementary division, though, so this is the first year we can be part of it."

"Wow. Does the institute have any other events like that—?"

"Hey, new kid, pipe down!" Tohrk shouted, cutting Almark off. "Stay quiet until Professor Bohen comes in. I see you Northerner brutes really don't know how to behave."

"Oh, sorry," Almark said, and then whispered to Morgan who was next to him, "Tohrk's really on edge today for some reason."

"He's really proud when it comes to martial arts. I mean, sure, he's strong, but he fights so violently. I wouldn't want to go up against him…" Morgan shrugged with a frown, and Almark sympathized.

A few moments later, a burly man—the martial arts instructor—

appeared.

"Everyone's here? Good, let's get started, then. I see we've got a new face today. You're the new student, right? Almark, was it?"

"Yes, sir," Almark replied, to which the instructor grinned.

"The headmaster told me about you. I'm the martial arts instructor, Professor Bohen. Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you, too." Almark bowed his head.

"I like that look in your eyes," Bohen said with a nod. "You're gonna be strong. Start by watching everyone else train, and you'll get the hang of it in no time."

"Yes, sir."

The training session began. Almark was surprised when he saw the swords everyone brought. At the mention of swords, he had imagined broadswords like the one he had in his room, but instead they used thin rapier-like swords that seemed to be missing most of their blades and could only be used to thrust.

Almark had never used this kind of sword, but he could tell that he'd never choose a thing like that for real combat. A thin blade wasn't completely unviable—it could slip into the gaps of a heavily armored opponent—but these were just too frail. If he were to try to riposte a strike from an axe or a spear, the blade would snap on the spot. He'd fought mercenaries who used all sorts of weapons, but he'd never seen someone use a sword this thin.

But then he cracked a bemused smile. He was probably the only one who looked at this in terms of real combat. The people living here hadn't known real war for a century. They only saw fencing or martial arts as a pastime at best.

After practicing some swipes through the air, the instructor split everyone up into pairs and had them put on armor made of tanned leather and wood as they conducted practice matches. The tip of the swords was wrapped in soft resin that made it so even a direct poke wouldn't hurt anyone.

That said, everyone dueled quite seriously. Out of everyone, Wollis moved the most elegantly. Despite winning all his bouts, he never seemed to put in much effort. Almark remembered hearing he was a savant at martial arts, too.

Morgan, on the other hand, was just as lacking in this field as he'd said. Even with armor, he still cowered from any swipes that

came his way. It wasn't an issue of reflexes, but rather a lack of competitive spirit. All he did was run around.

Nelson, by contrast, had very good reflexes and exhibited some good moves. His father was a knight's attendant, so perhaps swords happened to be his forte.

Meanwhile, Tohrk dueled one of his flunkies. And indeed, Tohrk's moves were good; his confidence was well-founded. In terms of the sheer force of his thrusts, he was a match for Wollis, if not even a bit stronger.

Almark's gaze moved to the girls. Most of them delivered small, timid thrusts, like they were playing. One pair, however, was dueling as intensely as the boys.

Wendy and Leila.

Perhaps the two of them just had more training in this field, as they were both nobles. Either way, they had fine movements. Almark watched their feverish exchange, impressed, until eventually Leila successfully landed a thrust on Wendy's chest. Their match over, the two wiped their sweat away and chatted with a smile. It seemed the two of them acknowledged each other's skills. And while he'd seen Wendy smile before, this was the first time he'd seen Leila look so happy.

At that moment, a rapier landed with a clatter in front of Almark.

"Pick it up, new kid."

It was Tohrk. He approached Almark with his two flunkies in tow.

"There's no place for weaklings in this class," Tohrk said, sneering at Morgan, who was struggling with a duel nearby. "Weaklings like him."

"No place for him, huh?" Almark countered, glancing at the rapier lying on the floor. "That's not for you to decide."

"You talk like you know it all." Tohrk's smirk widened, but Almark could tell it didn't extend to his eyes. "I see you haven't learned a thing after that huge mess you made the other day."

"I'm not defending my actions in the magic training area," Almark replied. "I'm sorry about what happened. I'm just glad no one got hurt."

"At least it showed you how much you don't belong here." Tohrk scowled. "Having dead weight like you slowing us down really pisses me off."

“If I’m causing you any trouble, then I apologize.”

Tohrk scoffed. “Did you pack up your things yet? How much longer till you leave?”

“I don’t have much to pack, to be honest.” Almark shrugged. “But I’m not leaving. It took me two years to finally get here.”

“What a load of crap. You make me sick,” Tohrk snarled. “What, you think you can make yourself look like a tough guy with some ridiculous lie about how you traveled all the way here on your own?”

Almark shook his head. “I don’t understand. Why would I lie about that?”

“What an imbecile…” Tohrk clicked his tongue. “Cheeky Northern barbarian.”

“You sure like to insult the North. Am I the first Northerner you’ve met?”

“Obviously.” Tohrk snorted. “It’s not every day we get people from that hellhole out in the boonies.”

“Makes sense.” Almark nodded. “Southern magic is really impressive, but Northerners aren’t all brutes, you know.”

“You’re telling me people who spend decades fighting each other to the death aren’t brutes?” Tohrk bared his teeth. “Those bandit wannabes who throw their weight around calling themselves Northern mercenaries?”

Almark’s expression hardened at the mention of Northern mercenaries, and Tohrk smirked.

“I’m right, aren’t I?” he said, looming over Almark, who remained speechless. “How about it, brute? Just looking at you makes my blood boil.” Tohrk gestured with his jaw toward their sparring classmates and challenged Almark with a look. “I can take you on.”

“I wasn’t told I’m allowed to participate.”

“What, you need Professor Bohen’s permission?” Tohrk scoffed and jerked his chin again. “He’s not looking.”

Indeed, Bohen was focused on instructing other students, devotedly showing them how to duel properly.

Almark shrugged and reluctantly picked up the sword. It was lighter than he’d thought, but it was made of fairly sturdy material. He wouldn’t need to rein in his strength too much.

“Fine then, I’ll take you up on that offer,” Almark said. “Um, my

armor…”

“Lend him yours, Garain,” Tohrk ordered one of his cronies.

Smirking, the boy called Garain took off his armor and thrust it over to Almark. Putting on the sweat-drenched tanned leather armor, Almark stood in front of Tohrk. He looked quite small when compared to Tohrk’s more robust physique.

“I’m ready.” Tohrk looked Almark up and down. “Heh. Filthy Northern barbarian. You can’t even cast an illumination spell right. Why did you even come here?”

Almark frowned.

“This institute isn’t for brutes like you. Go back to where you came from and get yourself killed in battle or something.”

“I was formally accepted to this institute,” Almark said.

“Not by *me* you weren’t.”

As soon as he said that, Tohrk thrust as hard as he could, aiming for Almark’s stomach. A fast swipe, compared to the other students. Almark knocked his blow down, however. This produced a sharp clanging sound that filled the arena, making everyone turn to look at them.

With his sword knocked down, Tohrk lost his balance and wobbled back a couple of steps. He hurriedly fixed his grip on his sword and corrected his stance.

“Why, you…!” A blood vessel bulged on his forehead.

“You’re a noble, right?” Almark said. “You talk pretty crass for someone of such high standing.”

Almark wondered how much he ought to taunt him. He’d been expecting a chance like this. He knew that Tohrk would try to mess with him in martial arts class, so he pretended to play along so he could put him in his place. He had made up his mind about this when he saw Wendy start crying yesterday.

Glancing behind Tohrk, he saw the other students watching nervously. Wendy looked at the two of them with a very pale face. Bohen was looking, too, but didn’t step in to stop them. Maybe the headmaster had told him something.

“Don’t get cocky just because you dodged it once!” Tohrk shouted.

Not even bothering to listen to him, Almark glanced at the students behind him. His eyes met Wendy’s.

Don't worry, Wendy. I'll repay you for your help.

Most students looked surprised or anxious. Leila, however, was watching calmly and disinterestedly, the polar opposite of Wendy. Almark could only be impressed by how collected she was. And then there was the class representative, Wollis; he looked at Almark with eyes that were chillingly icy.

Who is he? Almark thought. *I get the feeling he's the son of some high-ranking noble, but his eyes… They're like an experienced mercenary's.*

"I'll kill you," Tohrk growled.

Almark flashed a thin smile. "Hey, nobles don't throw around scary threats like that. Are you sure *you're* not the Northern mercenary here?"

"What?"

"Guess not. You're not nearly strong enough to be one." Almark smirked at Tohrk, who went red with anger.

That should be enough, thought Almark. *I don't need to keep riling him up*.

"You swine!" Tohrk spat, his vocabulary unbecoming for a student.

He thrust at Almark with all his might. This time he was aiming at Almark's face, the one spot not protected by armor. Almark dodged it by moving his head ever so slightly, and the female students screamed.

Seeing him dodge yet another powerful thrust sent Tohrk into a frenzy. He lunged for Almark's face, throat, and chest—all spots that could be fatal. Almark, however, dodged them with all the nimbleness of a mirage, and the blows didn't so much as graze him.

"Wow."

The students, initially overwhelmed, started raising their voices in surprise.

"How'd he do that? Tohrk can't hit him at all!"

"I didn't even think that was possible."

"It's like Tohrk's missing on purpose."

"No, Almark's just that good."

"It's like he knows what Tohrk's gonna do ahead of time."

Each time Tohrk heard someone praising Almark, his expression darkened. He pursued Almark, gritting his teeth as he kept thrusting

with his sword, but he never landed a hit. Soon enough, he was gasping for breath.

"Stop skittering around, you coward…," Tohrk spat bitterly.

Almark suddenly crouched—or so it seemed, but the next moment, his rapier landed a hit directly on Tohrk's chest piece with a *pop*.

"Got you," Almark said, raising his rapier and leaping backward.

The onlooking students cheered loudly.

"Wow, Almark won!" Morgan cried.

"No! No, this is all wrong!" Tohrk bellowed, his face flushed. "That doesn't count as a hit!"

"Don't be a sore loser, Tohrk," Leila said exasperatedly.

"Shut up! I don't care! He didn't win!"

Almark glanced at Bohen. Thankfully, it didn't seem like the teacher was going to step in.

Good, thought Almark.

"Fine, Tohrk," Almark said calmly. "I can go for one more round if you want."

"Of course I do!" Tohrk shrieked before taking position. "But under one condition."

"What's that?" Almark asked.

Tohrk's eyes were wide with anger. "We'll make a bet."

"What kind of bet?"

"If you lose, you have to leave the institute."

Wendy gasped.

"But if I win…" Almark looked straight at Tohrk. "I want you to stop treating students differently, whether they're nobles or commoners."

The class stirred. Wendy slapped her hands over her mouth and shook her head gently.

"As if I'd agree to a stupid bet like that—"

"What, Tohrk, you're scared?" Almark cut in.

Tohrk's eyes flared with anger.

"Scared I'll win?" Almark pressed.

Tohrk's face went dark red with humiliation. "Fine! You've got yourself a bet!" he howled like an animal. "Let's do it, barbarian! Today's the last day I have to see your nasty mug!"

"Good. That's a deal," said Almark. "Let's begin."

He stood up straight, aiming his rapier's tip at Tohrk.

Tohrk hurriedly leaped back, creating distance between them.

"I'm gonna kill you!" he hissed before swinging his rapier.

But despite how Tohrk talked and acted, his movements were cautious. He slowly edged toward Almark, not lunging forward recklessly like he had earlier. Almark, on the other hand, kept his position constant and made sure his rapier's tip was always aimed at his opponent. Tohrk practically tiptoed around Almark, which made for quite the strange sight since Tohrk was much larger.

"Son of a…!" Tohrk whispered reproachfully under his breath after circling Almark three times, frustrated that he couldn't find a single gap in his guard.

And it was from that relaxed, natural stance that Almark stepped forward to attack.

His posture was natural and devoid of any enmity or fervor, much to Tohrk's confusion. And from that calm posture, he thrust his rapier straight at Tohrk's stomach. He didn't look like he was winding up for an attack at all, but the thrust packed significant force.

The next moment, Tohrk's large body was flung through the air, hitting the wall with a loud *thud*.

"Gah!" Tohrk croaked, having fallen to the floor.

Almark walked up to Tohrk and hoisted his torso off the ground, grabbing him by the collar.

"I win, Tohrk." Almark brought his face close to Tohrk's and spoke quietly. "Swear to me. Now." For a second, Almark's eyes glinted like a wolf's. "Swear you'll never discriminate against your classmates, no matter if they're nobles or commoners."

Tohrk said nothing, gritting his teeth with a furious expression. Almark shook him by the collar, slamming his words into the boy.

"Swear it, Tohrk! On your surname! Swear it on the name of House Shifei! Swear you'll never insult them again!!"

Tohrk let out a low growl before falling silent. Then he finally forced the words out:

"…I swear it."

When Almark let go of Tohrk's collar, he heard cheering behind him. Turning around, he saw his classmates hurrying over to him.

"Wow! Wow!" Nelson said repeatedly, his excitement limiting his

vocabulary.

"Did you see Tohrk?! He went flying!" Morgan exclaimed.

"Did you practice martial arts?"

"How'd you get this strong?"

The rest of the class surrounded Almark and peppered him with questions. But standing at the back of the group was Wendy, who looked at Almark with teary eyes.

"…That was so reckless…," she eventually muttered.

"I told you I'd thank you, didn't I?" said Almark.

Wendy smiled to the best of her ability. She still had tears in her eyes, but to Almark, hers was the prettiest smile he'd ever seen.

"…Thank you, Almark."

Ah, so those were the words I wanted to hear from Wendy, Almark realized when he looked at her. *I wanted to repay her for all she's done for me, even if just a bit. And I did it in a pretty awkward way—the only way a Northern mercenary's son knows*.

But out of all his classmates' admiring gazes, Almark sensed one that stood out. A cold glare of malice and bloodlust.

It was Wollis.

Wollis stood apart from the rest of the group and was looking right at Almark. He'd never spoken to this overachieving class representative, so why did Wollis look at him with such hostility? Almark couldn't think of any reason for him to do that.

"All right, all right, settle down." Bohen, who'd watched things play out in silence so far, finally stepped in. "Tohrk, Almark, don't turn my class into a showdown. You're not hurt, are you, Tohrk?"

Tohrk shook his head wordlessly.

Bohen turned to everyone and spoke up so they all could hear. "Now everyone, listen." His voice silenced the students, who were still riled up from the outcome of the duel. "This is a good opportunity, actually. Let's talk about martial arts."

Bohen started walking between the students.

"At present, martial arts is but one subject you're being taught to enrich your education. But once, during the age of war, it was seen as the single most important subject. Back then, knowing how to hold your sword was seen as more important than knowing how to read. Well, I say that, but that was long before I was born, too!" Bohen added jokingly. "Martial arts is not a dance, nor is it a game.

The essence of martial arts are techniques geared toward how to most effectively hurt your opponent, how to most swiftly kill them. And even now, in an age far removed from war, that fact hasn't changed."

Everyone fell quiet, listening to Bohen as he turned his eyes to Tohrk.

"To that end, approaching your training with the intent of beating your opponent isn't wrong at all. If anything, without that kind of goal, martial arts wouldn't exist. So I will praise your spirit here, Tohrk."

Tohrk looked taken aback by this unexpected praise.

"But you took that spirit and you filled it with hatred," Bohen continued. "Hatred and battle aren't one and the same. The essence of martial arts is both sides giving their all to beat each other, but you must respect your opponent."

He surveyed his students.

"Respect your opponent," he repeated. "That's the purpose of learning martial arts in this age of peace. Tohrk, what you lack is respect for others. Without that, be it martial arts or magic, everything you do will be technique with no substance, and you will never touch on its true essence. I want you to reflect on that."

"…Yes, sir." Tohrk hung his head.

"Now then, Almark."

Almark raised his head when Bohen called his name.

"You set Tohrk up, didn't you?"

"I did," Almark admitted.

"I don't know what happened between you two. But you provoked someone far less skilled than you to get what you wanted. That's what's called foul play." Bohen fixed Almark with a stern gaze. "Tricking your classmates is shameful, lowly, and unacceptable. You need to reflect on that."

"…Yes, sir."

Bohen's expression softened. "However, everything we do has a reason and a motive. Almark, your words were true."

Almark looked up at Bohen with surprise.

"I agree with what you said. Here at this institute, it makes no difference whether someone is a commoner or a noble. I can't stand people who care about something so foolish." Bohen looked around

the class again and then returned his gaze to Almark. “You may have taken the wrong approach, but you did it for the right cause. So this time, I’ll overlook your bit of foul play.”

“Thank you, Professor.” Almark bowed his head in gratitude.

Bohen grinned. “However, if there’s one thing I won’t let pass, it’s you two choosing to settle your little feud in one of the few classes I teach. Settle your problems during your homeroom with Professor Fia instead. That was your biggest mistake today. As such, Almark, you’ll be on cleanup duty for martial arts class until the end of the year.”

After class was over, Almark got to work on cleaning things up as he was ordered, and Wendy joined him wordlessly. Morgan and Nelson did the same.

“Hey, hey, if you guys all help out, it won’t make for much of a punishment, will it?” Bohen said with a strained smile. His expression then hardened, though, and he pulled Almark closer. “Almark,” he whispered, “please go to the headmaster’s office today after classes are over.”

Almark hadn’t seen the headmaster since his first day at the institute.

He knocked on the heavy door to the headmaster’s office with an “excuse me” before entering. Eurog glanced up from his paperwork and looked back down at it once he saw who had arrived.

“Oh, there you are, Almark,” the old man said, hastily putting pen to paper. “Well? How’s life at the institute?”

“Every day is full of new experiences.”

“That’s wonderful.” Eurog continued writing without looking up at Almark. “I’ve heard you had quite a time recently.”

“Right.” Almark nodded, a strained smile on his lips.

“Your teachers have told me some things about you.”

Eurog’s tone wasn’t harsh, but Almark tensed up a little. Just what had his teachers said about him?

“But personally, I’d like to hear it from the horse’s mouth. How have things been for you here at the institute?”

“…Understood.”

Almark told Eurog everything that had taken place since he’d

started school. His classes, his lessons, his teachers. About his magic, how he failed casting an illumination spell, and about meditation training. Wendy's tears, his feud with Tohrk and the events of today's martial arts class. He explained it all concisely, occasionally including his thoughts. Eurog gave the occasional nod and even chuckled once, but let Almark finish speaking.

When Almark was done, Eurog put down his pen and looked at the boy, a glint in his blue eyes. "It seems your time here has been meaningful so far."

"Yes," Almark replied. "I haven't gotten the knack of magic yet, though."

"And what did Professor Illmis say about your progress?"

"He told me I shouldn't rush."

"Mhm." Eurog nodded. "Trust in his words. The time you spend learning and pondering magic, and the time you spend with your friends—both are necessary for you to become a mage. Don't neglect these pursuits."

"Yes, sir."

"How are you feeling?"

"Absolutely fine."

Eurog narrowed his eyes and smiled. "You really are made of different, sterner stuff. Producing a Dragon's Flame at your age and then being up and about the same day is astounding, you know."

"That's only because Professor Illmis and Professor Selia helped me. People are helping me all the time. Wendy and Morgan are always there for me, too. I wouldn't have been able to manage anything on my own."

"Good. Such feelings are at the core of magic. Never forget them. But on another matter…" Eurog changed the subject. "Do you have enough money?"

"Ah, yes, given that I don't have much use for it."

The institute provided the students with all their daily necessities —their uniform robes, clothes, daily meals, and lodging—free of charge. But for all their other needs, each student had a minor monthly stipend to buy any other groceries they might require. Everyone else made do with these stipends, mostly spending it on their days off to buy sweets and the like at town. Students from wealthier families also received an allowance from home.

Almark had no allowance, of course, only the stipend he got when he arrived at the institute, but he still hadn't even touched it.

"I see. Well, your father did ask me to look after you, so do come to me if you need anything."

"Yes, sir." Bit by bit, Almark was starting to question why the headmaster had summoned him. "Um, Headmaster, did you need me for something…?"

Eurog simply smiled. "No, we're done for today."

Almark stared at him for a moment, confused.

"You can go back to your room," Eurog said.

Almark left the headmaster's office, a bit baffled, and found Wendy, Nelson, and Morgan waiting for him with concerned looks on their faces.

"What are you guys doing here?" Almark asked them.

"Oh, um…," Wendy muttered, her expression grave.

Apparently, Morgan happened to hear Bohen tell Almark to go to the headmaster's office, and after he told everyone else about it, they saw Almark head there. When they waited for a while and still saw no sign of him—it had taken a while to tell Eurog about all his experiences at the institute thus far—they started assuming the worst and thought he was being punished or even expelled.

"I wasn't in trouble," Almark said with a bemused smile.

"Come on, Morgan, you lied to us," Nelson grumbled, shooting Morgan a peevish look.

Morgan went red in the face. "I wasn't lying! Almark really was called to the headmaster's office!"

Almark watched their interaction with a smile. "I appreciate the concern, though."

He was grateful to know the two of them cared so much about him. This kind of unconditional, selfless goodwill was something he rarely saw in the people of the North. As unpleasant as it was to admit, Northerners equated this kind of selflessness with foolishness and weakness. But Almark knew that this kind of selflessness had already saved him many times. And today, he felt like he was able to repay some of his gratitude for it. In his own way and as a Northerner.

Seeing Wendy and Morgan relieved that he wasn't in any trouble, Almark finally felt like he'd become part of the class.

Chapter 2

The Handkerchief in the Woods

The next day, Almark's daily routine truly began.

Morgan was hopeful that Tohrk would change his tune, but he wasn't any different after what happened. He was still haughty and violent, almost as if he didn't care at all that he'd lost so disgracefully to Almark the other day.

Since then, however, he'd stopped using scornful names like *commoner*, *barbarian*, or *brute*.

He's sticking to the promise he swore on his pride.

And yet, Wollis was still treating everyone but Almark kindly, and Leila was standoffish to everyone regardless of social class. Wendy was her opposite, kind to all without regard for their status. So although Tohrk had become more docile after being put in his place, the atmosphere in class hadn't really changed.

Almark actually brought this up to Wendy, but she just shook her head in denial.

"That's not true," she said. "You gave everyone courage that day, Almark. Since then, everyone stopped feeling so helpless." She stared so hard at Almark that it made him feel self-conscious. "You didn't just send Tohrk flying back then."

As he saw Wendy smile, Almark remembered Nelson responding to one of Tohrk's snide comments with a "put a sock in it, Tohrk." He'd also noticed that Tohrk's two flunkies, Garain and Deg, had started talking to other students.

"That's good, then," Almark said.

If Wendy was pleased with this outcome, then he figured there was nothing more to say. Surely things would get a bit better in class going forward. Besides, if there was one issue that currently

bothered Almark, it was his magic.

It had been over a month since Almark entered the institute and, aside from that one incident, he still hadn't used magic at all. His time during Illmis's classes was spent meditating, and all he really did in other lessons was classroom studies—like learning the names of historical figures or medicinal herbs used by apothecaries. He memorized these things with a speed that stunned his classmates, but when it came to practical magic classes, Almark was behind not just his classmates, but even the second-years.

It got to the point where Almark started wondering if he'd be better off joining the first-years' class for meditation. He consulted his homeroom teacher Fia about it, and she let him sit in on a first-year class and practice meditation there. But the presence of a clearly older student excited and distracted the first-years, getting in the way of their meditation, and so their teacher refused to let Almark join them after that first attempt. For now, all he could do was keep meditating and preparing his mana. Almark passed the days with that thought in mind.

One day, before morning classes began, Morgan burst into the classroom, his pudgy body jiggling.

"What's up, Morgan?" Nelson asked, seeing the boy panting. "What's got you so worked up?"

"A shadow," Morgan blurted out, seemingly short of breath. "I saw a shadow."

"A shadow?" Nelson frowned, and Almark exchanged a look with Wendy, who was seated next to him. "You've got one attached to your feet," Nelson said impishly as he pointed down. "See? Right there."

Morgan let out a yelp and jumped in the air. But the only thing at his feet was his own round shadow, cast by the midday sun.

"Nelson!" Morgan threw up his hands. "Don't scare me like that!"

"Can you blame me? You're the one literally getting startled at shadows," Nelson said, bemused.

"I didn't mean *my* shadow!" Morgan waved his arms impatiently. "It's a monster, I know it!"

"A monster?" Nelson smirked. "Here you go again, you and your overactive imagination."

"It is not my imagination!" Morgan pouted. "It's true!"

“Is it, though?”

“Morgan,” Almark said. He suddenly approached Morgan, who looked at him with surprise.

“Wh-what’s up, Almark?” Morgan asked.

“Can you tell me more about what you saw?”

“Of course.”

Nelson smiled wryly. “Don’t take him too seriously, Almark.”

“I swear it’s the truth!”

“Yeah, tell me more,” Almark said gently, urging Morgan to go on.

Nelson shook his head, as if to say “whatever.”

“You see, this morning…,” Morgan began.

He told Almark that earlier that morning, he dozed off after breakfast in his room and had to walk from the dorms to the schoolhouse alone. There were no other students on the road, and he was hurrying to class. But then, he saw something moving behind the trees and turned to look. During spring one could sometimes see rabbits peeking out of the woods, but what Morgan saw moving from the corner of his eye was considerably larger. It was the figure of a person, taller than Morgan himself. He got closer and looked restlessly around the trees, but saw nothing.

Maybe I imagined it, he told himself as he ran down the road, realizing he was late for class.

But then, he saw the shadow move from the corner of his eye again. A shadow as big as, if not a bit larger than Morgan. He turned around, screeching, but there was nothing there.

“…And that’s how it all went down.”

After hearing Morgan’s story, Almark crossed his arms, looking confused.

“So you didn’t actually see anything!” Nelson jeered.

“I did, too! I saw a shadow for a second!”

“A monster, huh…?” Almark whispered.

Wendy peered at his face. “Something on your mind?”

“Yeah.” Almark nodded. “I mean, monsters do make their homes in forests.”

“No, they don’t.” Nelson waved his hand dismissively. “Almark, there aren’t any monsters in the woods next to the institute. And the road between the dorms and the schoolhouse isn’t in the woods

to begin with."

"Oh, right."

Like Nelson said, there were some trees around the road connecting the dorms and the schoolhouse, but it was more of a grove than an outright forest.

"I mean, Nelson's not wrong, but…" Morgan frowned, frustrated. "I'm telling you guys, I saw something…"

"You were just imagining things. I mean, you can be kind of skittish." Nelson folded his hands behind his head. "Ever since I came to the institute, I've never once seen a monster around here, even in the woods."

Morgan slumped his shoulders. "Maybe it really was my imagination…"

"It doesn't hurt to be cautious," Almark said, but Morgan seemed to be losing confidence in whether he'd even seen anything.

"I guess I'm just happy I made it to class in time…," Morgan mumbled dejectedly as he shuffled back to his seat.

Almark remained pensive after Morgan left, so Wendy eyed him quizzically. "Is it still on your mind?" she asked.

"Yeah…" Almark gave a strained smile. "I saw a lot of monsters in the North, so maybe hearing about them made me kind of jumpy." He then looked guiltily at Wendy. "I guess that must sound weird to a Southerner."

"Oh, not at all." Wendy shook her head. "It's not weird. I want you to tell me more about things like that."

Seeing the earnest look on Wendy's face, Almark gave a slightly bemused smile. "It's nothing worth telling."

The memories of the bloodied times he spent fighting for his life in the North weren't something to tell a lovely girl on such a fine morning.

"Sorry," he said, and after noticing Wendy's sad eyes, he added, "But thank you."

Wendy smiled in relief.

The door to the classroom clattered open, and the class representative Wollis peered inside with his usual cool demeanor.

"Everyone, Professor Demitor will be late for first period, so we'll have study hall until he arrives," he announced.

The entire class cheered.

A few days passed after Morgan saw that shadow.

One day, Almark stayed late to do meditation training and was hurrying back to the dorm. Summer was approaching, and that meant a change in weather—case in point, his clothes under his robe were moist with sweat from the blistering sun. For a Northerner like Almark, the heat of the South was a bit much, but he appreciated days being longer since it meant more time to practice. But he still needed to hurry back before Miss Maya cleared the dinner table away.

Just then, he saw someone sprinting from the other side of the road, a lit lantern swaying in their hands.

"…Lilty?"

Almark recognized her right away. It was Lilty, a dainty girl from his class.

"Where are you off to?" Almark called out to her, which made her jolt in surprise.

She stopped, looked at him, and then sighed with relief. "Oh, it's you, Almark."

"What business do you have at the schoolhouse when it's this dark out?"

"…I'm not headed for the schoolhouse," Lilty replied feebly.

"You're not? I mean, up ahead is…"

The only thing there except for the elementary division's schoolhouse was the woods. The intermediate and advanced divisions' schoolhouse was on the opposite side of the dorms, and he couldn't imagine what she'd have to do there.

"…The woods," Lilty said, her expression stiff.

"The woods? At this hour?" Almark frowned.

Lilty hung her head, like she was trying to make herself even smaller than she already was.

"Lilty, I wouldn't go into the woods at night unless you have a good reason. If you have to, go tomorrow."

Almark had no good memories of the woods at night. That was when things were full of danger and darkness, betrayal and malice. Nothing else.

"But…I have to go. See you later!"

No sooner did Lilty say this than she sprinted past him and

vanished. A bit taken aback, Almark watched the lamp's wavering light disappear down the road.

Lilty—whose parents were musicians with the Royal Conservatory in the Foretta Kingdom, a large country in the central plains—was known for being the most skittish girl in Almark's class. She flinched whenever Tohrk raised his voice and refused to walk down the path back to the dorms alone if it was too dark. Her timidness made Almark remember her very quickly, even in the short time since he transferred in.

So it was hard to imagine a scaredy-cat like Lilty going into the woods alone after dark with only a lantern. Something serious must have driven her to do this. Almark glanced at the road to the dorm, his mind filling with images of the dinner table lined with warm food. He then turned around and looked at the road leading to the woods and thought of Lilty running in there all alone with just a small lantern.

…I mean, I can't not help after seeing her.

Sighing, Almark followed Lilty.

The woods beyond the schoolhouse served as a playground and training area for the students. It had plenty of clearings and a small stream, making it ideal for children to play in. Further in, the terrain became rougher, with rocky crags and a waterfall, and there was an abundance of valuable herbs used for making medicinal concoctions in healing arts class.

The woods made up a significant part of the institute's premises, extending all the way to the intermediate and advanced dorms. The area wasn't without dangers; there were vague rumors about monsters or sealed ruins within the deepest parts of the woods, but none of the elementary students had encountered anything of that sort.

Almark himself was curious about the woods, although he was too preoccupied with his studies and training to check it out. He had only gone in a handful of times to gather herbs for healing arts class.

But for the students who had spent time there since their first year at the institute, this place was like their own backyard. They knew their way around its winding paths. Each student had their

own favorite spot in the shade, a rock formation that offered good visibility, or a forest clearing only they knew about. Almark often saw Nelson and Morgan hurry to the woods right after class to play with their friends.

However, as beloved and familiar as it was to many students, the forest became completely different come nightfall. The student body was strictly forbidden from entering after dark.

"Lilty!" Almark called out as he caught up to her.

Lilty turned around and looked at him with tears in her eyes.

"It's dangerous out here alone," Almark said. "I'll come with you."

For a moment, Lilty's face lit up, but then her expression clouded over again.

"I can't ask you to do that…" Lilty shook her head. "You haven't had dinner yet, right?"

"Miss Maya probably cleaned everything up by now. I'll join you," Almark insisted, smiling so as not to seem like he was going out of his way. "But in exchange, tell me why you have to go into the woods when it's this late."

"Huh? Well, um, that's because…" Lilty hesitated for a moment. But looking into the dark forest, her courage to go in alone must have faltered. "…I lost something in there."

"What was it?"

"A handkerchief…from my parents."

"A handkerchief?" Almark repeated, a bit baffled.

Lilty hung her head sheepishly.

"I mean, I can understand that if you got it from your parents, it must mean a lot to you. But…why does it have to be today?" Almark asked, glancing up at the starry night sky. "The woods are dangerous after dark. We can go tomorrow if you'd like."

"…"

Lilty said something, but her voice was too meek for Almark to hear, even with his keen hearing.

"Hm?"

Lilty's voice was especially quiet, and when teachers asked her questions during class, they rarely were able to hear her answers. Some would frown and ask "What?", which made Lilty go very red, and her voice would get even quieter. That was when her roommate, Norish, often stepped in to repeat whatever she'd said.

But even with all that in mind, Lilty's voice was unusually soft right now.

"Sorry," said Almark.

Norish wasn't there to speak for Lilty this time.

Almark held up a finger. "I couldn't hear you. Could you say that one more time?"

He brought his ear closer to Lilty. This just made her blush and pull away from him bashfully.

"…eep," she muttered, looking the other way.

Almark still couldn't hear what she'd said.

"Are you scared?"

He guessed that she'd just let out a small yelp, but Lilty shook her head, still blushing.

"Was that not it? Sorry, I'll listen really close this time, so could you say it again?"

"…Can't sleep."

"Hm?" Almark knitted his brows. Can't sleep. That's what he heard. "You have trouble sleeping?"

"I just said!" Lilty went red up to her ears and shouted in desperation. "I can't sleep without my hankie!"

Almark froze in surprise.

"…See, I didn't want to tell anyone." Lilty glared at the woods with tears in her eyes, refusing to look at Almark.

"Sorry, I wasn't trying to mock you or anything," he said hurriedly. "I was just a bit surprised, is all. Tell me more about what's going on."

"No."

"I'll listen, really. Come on."

Almark patiently coaxed answers out of Lilty until he was able to piece together the story.

Lilty's lost handkerchief was a present her parents gave her when she started studying at the institute.

Children entered the institute at the age of nine. Most students grew lonely or homesick from being separated from their families at such a tender age, but Lilty in particular had a hard time adjusting to life in the institute. She was shy, and her voice was naturally small, which meant she struggled to make friends.

Lilty adored her parents and missed them dearly, and so she spent

every night crying in bed. But when she held that handkerchief in her hands, it reminded her of her parents, and she could fall asleep without sobbing.

She had since opened up to her roommate Norish and gotten used to life in the dorms, but sleeping with her handkerchief had become a habit, and she still couldn't fall asleep without holding it.

"…I know it's weird. I'm eleven and I still need my hankie to fall asleep," Lilty said, sulking.

"Hm…"

Almark couldn't deny it was unusual. He imagined what it would be like if he, too, needed a handkerchief to go to sleep.

"Whatcha got there, Almark?!"

The voice of Galba, his childhood friend from the Black Wolf Riders, echoed in his head. He'd no doubt laugh at Almark for sleeping with a handkerchief. But then, Almark reconsidered. What if he'd received his mother's pendant earlier, before he left on his travels? Maybe he'd have gone to sleep holding on to it.

Galba's face came to mind. Would Galba mock him for that? There wasn't a big difference between the handkerchief and the pendant. Both held the same significance.

"It's not weird at all," Almark said earnestly.

Lilty looked up at him with surprise. "You're not going to laugh at me?"

"No, I'm not." Almark shook his head. "Everyone has something that means the world to them."

Lilty nodded, still visibly shocked. "Yeah, you're right," she mumbled, embarrassed.

"Sorry for saying you should wait until tomorrow."

If he lost his mother's pendant in the woods, he definitely wouldn't wait until the next day to look for it. Absolutely not.

"Thank you for telling me. Let's find your handkerchief together."

Lilty stared at Almark, bewildered. "No, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have shouted at you."

"Don't worry about it. Come on, I'm sure we'll find it in no time."

He sounded so sure of this that it made Lilty blink in confusion.

They passed by the schoolhouse and stepped into the woods. The scenery around them shifted almost at once—the treetops blocked

out the moonlight, and the air carried a sudden chill. All around them, they heard the rustling of tree branches.

The two hurried over to the spot where Lilty believed she had dropped her handkerchief. Thankfully, she knew which way to go, and it was relatively close to the entrance to the woods. Lilty had gone there after class that day to gather herbs for their upcoming healing arts class, but the vines proved too thick, so she took out a folding knife from her pocket to cut through them. That must have been when the handkerchief fell out of her pocket.

"Okay. Let's split up and look for it," said Almark. "What color is the handkerchief?"

"White," Lilty replied right away, and then pushed her lantern into Almark's hands. "You use it."

"But what about—?"

Before Almark could finish, a small flame puffed to life in Lilty's hand.

Illumination magic. She produced it much faster and more smoothly than he'd seen her do it on their first practical magic class. She even adjusted its size to effectively match the forest's darkness.

Illmis had told him not to rush, and Almark always reminded himself of that, but he couldn't help but feel a throb of impatience at moments like this.

Am I really going to learn how to use magic? Will I ever be able to use it this naturally?

Almark started to feel anxious, but he kept it at bay. Now wasn't the time for such emotions.

He and Lilty lit up the ground in silence for a few minutes. Almark expected a white handkerchief to stand out, but they had a hard time finding it.

"Are you sure you dropped it around here?" he asked Lilty.

"Yes. See, we were picking the coiling blackhawk claw over there… The ones with the vines."

Lilty floated up the magic light in her hand slightly into the air. This illuminated the area above them, revealing the coiling blackhawk claw vines wrapped around the trees.

"All right."

The two went back to work, but though they searched in silence

for minutes, the white handkerchief was nowhere to be found.

Almark heard sniffling. He turned around and saw Lilty was tearing up.

“Oh no… What if we can’t find it…?” she moaned.

He couldn’t tell her it was just a handkerchief. He knew it meant so much more to Lilty, which was honestly self-evident just from the fact a timid girl like her ran out into the night with only a lantern in hand to search for it.

“Don’t worry. We’ll find it,” Almark assured her.

He couldn’t deny that they might not find it, but he knew he couldn’t under any circumstances let Lilty see he felt that way.

“We’ll find your handkerchief for sure,” he added patiently. “Let’s try expanding our search.” Almark got to his feet, which made the lamp’s light waver. “I’ll look over there.”

He started to walk away, but then Lilty grabbed him by the sleeve.

“Wait,” she said.

“Huh?”

“Don’t leave me all alone.”

Her eyes were full of fear; Almark had no choice but to give in. He’d nearly forgotten Lilty was very much a scaredy cat and was probably terrified just from being out in the dark.

“Sorry about that. Let’s look together.”

The range of their search was going to be very limited so long as Lilty refused to leave Almark’s side.

“I’ll look over here… Lilty, you look over there.”

“Almark, did you check that thicket?”

The two stayed close together, talking to each other as they searched through the dark for who knows how long.

“We might have overlooked something on the first go around. Let’s double check the spots we’ve already seen one more time,” Almark suggested once he saw Lilty was losing all hope.

He lit up a thicket Lilty had already looked through earlier. “How about you check over there where I’ve been, and I’ll look here?”

“Sure…,” Lilty said, her voice thin. She sniffled again.

But then, they heard rustling from the thicket. Lilty let out a small screech and clung to Almark.

“It’s okay.”

Almark spotted the source of the sound from the corner of his eye.

"Some fruit just fell down." He approached the thicket with Lilty and picked up a ripened fruit. "See?"

"You're right…" Lilty breathed out in relief.

"Most things that look scary turn out to be harmless when you find out what they really are—like this fruit." Almark dropped the fruit to the ground and smiled. "It's exactly when you're scared that you want to keep your eyes open, not closed. Being blindly afraid is the riskiest thing you can do."

"…Right."

Lilty stared at the fallen fruit.

"What do you feel like doing, Lilty? Are you too scared to keep going?" Almark asked gently.

Lilty shook her head. "Just a little longer."

"All right."

In Lilty's eyes, the handkerchief must have been worth grappling with her fear.

"I'll stay with you until we're finished here."

The two resumed their search, this time with Lilty expanding the area they looked in. She walked a short distance away from Almark, bravely looking, and eventually, it paid off. A short while after they started looking…

"I found it!" Lilty shouted.

"You did?!" Almark hurried over.

"Yeah!" Lilty held up the handkerchief victoriously.

"Huh? But it isn't…," Almark started, but then decided to shut his mouth.

He personally wouldn't describe Lilty's handkerchief as "white." It was gray at best, and honestly closer to black…

Come to think of it, Lilty did say she slept with it every night.

It probably had originally been white… Well, that certainly explained why they had such a hard time finding it.

Either way, this was a huge relief. Lilty tearfully clutched the rag that was once a white handkerchief, and Almark urged her to head back.

"Thank you, Almark," Lilty said cheerfully, holding onto his sleeve. "I'm so glad you came with me."

“Don’t mention it.” Almark felt his face naturally relax into a smile at the sight of how happy Lilty was. “I’m just glad we found it. Your courage won out.”

“C-courage? Don’t exaggerate…,” Lilty muttered sheepishly. “I wouldn’t have found it without you.”

“I only helped. You’re the one who made up her mind to look for it.”

Suddenly, they heard a flute in the distance.

Almark’s body unconsciously tensed. A lukewarm wind blew through the woods as if in response to the sound. The trees rustled noisily.

Oh. So today’s that kind of day. Almark grimaced. *This sound always puts me on edge.*

“…It’s the hour of the monsters,” he said. “Let’s hurry back.”

“Huh?” Lilty turned to look at him, her expression stiff. “What? What are you talking about? Don’t scare me like that.”

“Don’t you know? When you hear that sound in a forest—”

As soon as he said that, he remembered that this was the logic of the Northern forests. But had he ever heard that horn when he hiked through the woods in the central plains or the South…?

No, I don’t have time to think about this now.

The atmosphere of the woods behind them shifted. This place was no longer safe for humans.

“Lilty, we have to go.”

Almark took Lilty’s hand and pulled her along, listening carefully to any noises coming from deep in the forest.

Nothing yet. We’re still okay.

“What? What’s going on?” Lilty asked anxiously as Almark broke into a jog.

“Let’s hurry.”

We’ll probably be fine so long as we make it out of here.

Believing in this as ardently as he could, Almark upped their pace to a run. They raced through the woods, the light shaking in front of them as the lantern in his hand wavered with each step.

“I’m scared,” Lilty whispered in between gasps of air. “Almark, this is scaring me.”

“Don’t worry.”

I’m scared, too, and I’m not confident I can protect her. But so long as

we make it out of this forest…

By the time they left the woods and stepped into the bright moonlight, their hands were covered in sweat. Lilty was panting, her hands on her knees.

"Good job keeping up with me," Almark told her, and then looked toward the dark entrance to the woods. "I think we're safe here, but let's get a little further away, just in case."

Lilty nodded and looked up, not asking the natural question of "safe from what?" She was likely too afraid to risk finding out. The two hurried back to the dorms, still holding hands. After walking for a while, they passed the dark schoolhouse and noticed a group of people with lanterns approaching.

"Huh? Someone's coming over here. Hey, who's there?!" a voice called out to Almark and Lilty. It was a lively voice—a familiar one…

"Nelson! It's me, Almark! Lilty's here, too!"

"Almark and Lilty? Oh, good. I found them, guys!"

The group approached them, lanterns in hand. Lilty hurriedly let go of Almark's hand as Nelson, Morgan, and Norish reached them. Apparently, when Norish noticed Lilty wasn't back after dinner, she went to their classmates for help. Since Almark didn't have a roommate, no one noticed he was late to come back, too.

"Oh, Lilty, I was so worried!" Norish wrapped her arms around Lilty, who apologized.

Looks like everything's settled, thought Almark.

He sighed with relief, but then Nelson approached and elbowed him in the ribs.

"What were you two doing outside this late, Almark? Sounds pretty fishy to me…"

"Nothing, it's just…" Almark started to answer, but paused to think. Telling the truth could end up hurting Lilty's reputation. "I ended up practicing my meditation for longer than I'd expected, and then I happened to run into Lilty."

He came up with an excuse on the spot. Lilty did the same, saying she'd gone back to the schoolhouse to find something she forgot, only to remember where she'd put it. A forced excuse, and one Norish had a hard time believing.

"Huh?" Nelson frowned suspiciously, as expected.

“You’re so diligent, Lilty,” Morgan said, his tone easygoing. “I wouldn’t go out to pick something up when it’s this dark out.”

Everyone laughed, putting the topic behind them.

Nice one, Morgan, Almark said to himself. This got them out of needing to explain things.

“Lilty,” Almark called out, careful to make sure no one was looking as he handed her the lantern.

Suddenly, Lilty got very close to him and whispered bashfully into his ear, “Thank you for everything, Almark,” she said. “And keep my hankie a secret.”

On the way back to the dorms, Morgan told him that he, Nelson, and Norish weren’t the only group out looking for Lilty; Wendy, Leila, Wollis, and Tohrk had also gone out to find her.

“Even Tohrk?” Almark was surprised.

“Yeah. Tohrk gets real serious when it comes to this sort of thing.”

“Huh.” Almark smiled.

When one of their own was in need, everyone banded together to help them. Wendy was right. This was a good class.

Nelson probably ran ahead and told the others, because Tohrk and his two cronies were standing in front of the dorm. When he saw Almark’s face, he snorted in annoyance and went into the building.

“Wendy and Leila are back,” Nelson told Almark and the others once he’d taken a head count. “Hmm. The only one who’s not back yet is Wollis.”

“He’s still out there?” Almark asked in surprise, looking around for the class representative. “Where did he go looking for us?”

“Well, it’s Wollis, so there’s probably nothing to worry about,” Norish said with an uncomfortable smile. “But going back to our rooms without him would be pretty mean.”

“I’ll wait here, too,” Almark said. “We got all of you worked up over this, so it’s the least I can do.”

“Then I’ll stay, too,” Lilty added, but Almark held up a hand.

“You don’t have to, Lilty.”

“But—”

“You see, I still haven’t spoken to Wollis ever since I came here,”

Almark said with a smile. “So this is a good chance for me to finally get to know him.”

“Well, if you say so…”

Lilty headed to the dorm with the rest of the kids in one big cheery pack.

Almark waved goodbye as he remained by the entrance, waiting for Wollis. After a while, Wollis appeared in the road leading to the schoolhouse. He wasn’t carrying a lantern, but the dorm lights still managed to illuminate his handsome features; he appeared lost in thought.

“Wollis,” Almark called. “Thanks for looking out for us. Lilty and I are both back.”

Wollis didn’t respond. He silently approached Almark and stared at him. Wollis’s golden hair wavered, and his handsome face momentarily contorted in scorn.

“The forest was crying out,” Wollis said.

“Huh?” Almark’s eyes widened in surprise.

But Wollis said nothing more. He passed Almark, who then heard the door to the dorm opening. Wollis went inside without so much as glancing back at him.

After a rigorous scolding from the dorm supervisor Maya for being late, Almark returned to his room. He meditated, as was part of his daily routine, only for it to be disturbed by a growl from his stomach. He had missed dinner, but that shouldn’t have bothered him—in the past, he’d gone entire days without a single meal.

Back in his days as a mercenary, there were times when he marched separately from their main unit and had to spend two days sipping on whatever water he could find. Then there were times on his journey south that he ran out of money and had to spend sleepless nights curled up and fighting off hunger. He thought he’d gotten used to having an empty stomach.

The human body is so lazy, he thought. It had a hard time getting used to suffering, but obediently yielded to whatever was easiest. Almark had eaten breakfast and lunch, but just skipping dinner made him so hungry his concentration wavered.

I can’t do my training like this, he realized in frustration. He knew that mages were perfectly capable of using magic even when

hungry, but he wanted to get some quality practice in.

He considered buying some sweets from Morgan, who often went out to town to buy them with his saved up allowance. Almark wasn't audacious enough to ask him to give them away for free, but surely he'd be all right with trading some candy for a little cash.

Time was of the essence. The sooner Almark got some food in him, the better. Just as he took out a few coins and got to his feet, he heard a knock at the door. He opened it, wondering if Morgan came at just the right time, but found Wendy standing there instead.

"Oh, hey, Wendy." Almark blinked, surprised by her sudden visit.

She wasn't in her usual uniform robe; instead, she was wearing soft, comfy-looking clothes—likely because she was getting ready to go to bed. This made Almark a bit flustered, and he wasn't sure if looking straight at her was appropriate.

Seemingly unaware of Almark's feelings, Wendy said, "I heard you came back late with Lilty…so I figured you might have missed dinner. It's not much, but…"

She handed him something wrapped with cloth. Almark thanked her and accepted the bundle, opening it up to reveal a few small cookies.

"Huh? All this? No, I can't."

"I bought some of these the last time I went into town, but I ended up with too many. There's no way I can eat them all, so I'd appreciate it if you could take them off my hands," Wendy explained with a smile. She retreated a few steps, as if to show that she wasn't going to take the cookies even if he tried giving them back.

"Well, if you insist…"

Almark accepted the cookies. He knew the part about her buying too many was probably a white lie, but he couldn't turn them down after she made this gesture.

"Thanks, Wendy. It feels like you're always looking out for me."

"I should be saying that. Oh, the star-shaped cookies are really good." Wendy peered into Almark's hands and pointed at one cookie in particular. "Anyway, I don't want to disturb your meditation practice. See you tomorrow."

With that, Wendy left. Almark followed her with his eyes until

she turned the corner. But before she did, she turned around and waved one last time, mouthing “good luck!”

Once he confirmed she was gone, Almark shut the door and popped a cookie into his mouth. The cookies proved surprisingly filling, so he stopped after three to ensure they wouldn’t make him too sleepy.

But then, there was another knock on the door. He opened it, wondering if this time it actually was Morgan, but he found himself face to face with someone petite and skinny—the polar opposite of Morgan.

It was Lilty.

Almark stared at her in surprise, and Lilty spoke in just barely above a whisper.

“Thanks for today. I know you skipped dinner, so have this.”

Then she shoved a bag of wrapped cookies into Almark’s hands. Before he could say anything, she hurriedly added, “The star-shaped ones are the tastiest. Bye,” and ran off.

Almark returned to his room and compared the two star-shaped cookies.

Guess I won’t need to buy any sweets off Morgan for a little while, he thought.

The strange, eerie noise that rang through the woods at night, the flute-like sound Almark and Lilty heard—Northerners called it the Forest Magic Flute. Almark didn’t know what produced that sound, but his father said it was the grim reaper. A traveling mage he’d met said it was when “darkness took tangible form.”

But in truth, no one really knew for sure.

However, any child of the North knew that this sound could sometimes be heard at night in the woods, when it got dark enough. And when it did, it served as a signal for monsters to appear. Unusual and terrible monsters, different from any creatures that usually inhabited the forest.

Prime enemies of mankind. Terror given form.

Like the volapa, a two-headed abomination covered in black fur.

And the delugan, a terrible monster with hair as sharp as knives.

Or the marmudan, a warlock covered in scales that commanded strange magic.

Their biology was unexplained, and their reason for attacking people unknown. All that was clear about them was that they were terribly hostile to humans and incredibly powerful. Even seasoned mercenaries hesitated to fight them. Almark had encountered them a few times himself, and it was a terrifying experience. Even now, hearing their terrible cry—perhaps some call in an unknown language—made his hair stand on end.

Creatures that seemed like mankind's fear of the dark personified. They brought massacre wherever they went and disappeared with the rise of dawn. Rumors spoke of mercenary groups that were unlucky enough to run into a group of them, only to be wiped out in one night.

But those were all tales from the northern woods. Almark couldn't recall hearing that sound in any woods ever since he crossed the Menoba Strait.

The day after the incident with Lilty, Almark told Fia about the sound they heard in the woods. If they really had appeared in the woods last night, Almark wasn't confident he could have kept Lilty safe while unarmed.

Upon hearing his story, Fia paused for thought and said she would reinforce the prohibition on students entering the woods at night. Almark hadn't seen any monsters himself, after all, and there was nothing to suggest it was the same as the Magic Flute from the northern regions. And so, he didn't pursue the matter any further.

But from that day onward, Almark included something else in his daily routine. When he returned to his room to meditate, he also diligently tended to his longsword.

Despite Almark's concerns, no monsters emerged from the woods, and life at the institute passed by peacefully.

On one such quiet day, during a break between classes, Morgan approached Almark with a question.

"Say, Almark, have you heard the story about the Lord Boruqe statue in the garden?"

"Lord Boruqe?" Almark frowned. "Lord Boruqe… Who's that? I think I might have heard the name before, but I'm not sure…"

"Huh? We learned about him in class… Oh, that was last year. You weren't here yet," Morgan said, growing pensive.

The garden…, Almark thought. "I haven't looked around the garden very much. It's got a bunch of statues, right?"

"Yeah, but Lord Boruqe's statue is in the grass maze."

"Oh…" Almark nodded.

There was a large garden between the school gates and the road leading to the schoolhouse, tended to by many gardeners. It was close to the dorms and hidden among numerous trees; Almark had seen part of it during his tour with Zeid on his first day at the institute. When going from the dorms to town, many students chose to save time by cutting through the garden instead of passing all the way through the schoolhouse.

At the very center of the garden was a series of grass walls, each about as tall as an adult and spread out in an elaborate pattern. The paths between them looked like a maze, and on the other side of the maze was a statue of a robed mage.

This garden was apparently the grounds of an estate once owned by the former governor of Norkh Island. That was when Almark

remembered—Lord Boruqe was the name of that governor.

"Oh, right," said Almark. "This island is part of King Garai's domain, but it was originally donated to him a long time ago."

"Yep, and that was Lord Boruqe," Morgan said proudly. "So you *have* heard of him."

"Yeah, sorry. I just couldn't remember it off the top of my head."

Almark was trying hard to keep up with his classes, but it was a lot of information at once. *Remembering something doesn't mean you necessarily understand it*, he thought.

"So what's the story about Lord Boruqe?" Almark asked.

Morgan lowered his voice to a hush, looking very grave. "Well, this is just between you and me…"

"Skip the theatrics," Almark said, rolling his eyes, but Morgan shook his head.

"C'mon, don't be like that. This is serious."

"All right, all right. So?"

"Lord Boruqe's statue."

"Yes?"

"It talks at night."

Morgan peered into Almark's face, like he was asking "so, what do you have to say to *that*?" Almark, for his part, wasn't sure how to answer.

"Oh. Okay."

His indifferent reaction left Morgan frustrated.

"Come on, Almark, you could at least be a little more freaked out."

"I mean…" Almark scratched his head. "Doesn't this just sound like a ghost story?"

"Of course it does!" Morgan exclaimed, drawing attention from Nelson, Wendy, and Lilty, who excitedly gathered around them.

"What are you two talking about, Morgan?" Wendy asked.

"Good timing. Hear me out, guys! Almark's not getting into it at all!" Morgan turned to Almark. "Picture this: You're in the garden at night. No one's around, and it's pitch black. And then you hear somebody whispering. Almark, that's when you start walking through the garden wondering who could be there. It sounds like the voice is coming from the depths of the maze. It's already easy enough to get lost in there, plus it's dark out, so you stumble

around, following the voice. Finally, you make it through the maze and find the source of the voice! But just when you look to see who it is…"

Morgan paused for dramatic effect, and then finished his story.

"…there's no one there. Just the Lord Boruqe statue, standing silently at attention…"

Nelson gave an impressed "ooooh," and Wendy clapped. Lilty had covered her ears halfway through the story.

"The way you tell it makes it sound like you're speaking from experience…," Almark said. "Did all that really happen to you, Morgan?"

"What are you, crazy?" Morgan asked, looking offended. "I don't have that kind of courage. I heard it from someone in Class 1."

"Aw, come on. It's just hearsay?" Nelson asked, exasperated. "I thought you were talking about yourself. So you didn't actually hear the statue talk."

"Why would I do something that scary all by myself?"

"What, you think you're better than that…? Still, it's an interesting story." Nelson's eyes were gleaming with excitement.

As the son of a knight's attendant, Nelson was very good-natured and sincere, but he was also a little more childish than his classmates. Morgan's ghost story had clearly tickled his boyish curiosity.

"How about we all go see Lord Boruqe together tonight?" Nelson suggested.

"No way." Morgan shot the idea down instantly. It was quite the blunt refusal, given he was the one who'd brought up the story. "What kind of crazy person would willingly do something that scary?"

"Hey, it was *your* idea." Nelson shrugged. "Ugh, you're so boring. Almark, Wendy, you'll come with me, right?"

"Uh, I'm not really that interested…"

"Me neither…"

When Almark and Wendy turned him down, Nelson slumped his shoulders in disappointment.

"I mean, I can get why Wendy would say no… But I took you for someone who'd heed the call to adventure, Almark."

"Sorry, Nelson."

Honestly, Almark's daily training was way more important than this horror show. He felt bad for shooting down Nelson's idea, but he needed the time to meditate.

"Oh, fine. I guess I'll just go alone and figure out where that voice is really coming from."

"What? No, don't! What if it's dangerous?" Wendy said, wide-eyed. "You can't go alone."

"I'll be fine." Nelson sounded fully confident. "Going around the woods at night might be dangerous, but the garden? I mean, the guards at the front gate are a stone's throw away. It's not dangerous."

Hearing a mention of the woods at night reminded Almark of the events with Lilty the other day, as well as the flute he had heard that night. But Nelson was right; the garden wasn't the woods, and there was no risk of monsters there.

"Nelson, just be extra careful at nighttime," Almark said.

"Come on, you too, Almark?" Nelson shrugged. "There's nothing to worry about. I'm gonna go out there tonight. Just sit tight; I'll get to the bottom of this mystery."

Almark looked at Wendy, who looked back and shook her head in resignation.

No point in stopping him, Almark thought. But just then…

"What's this about?" asked a calm voice.

Wendy turned around. "Oh, Wollis."

It was the class representative, standing there with a peaceful smile.

"Hey, Wollis. You wanna come with?" Nelson asked.

Wollis cringed. "Like I said, what's going on?"

"Uh, you see…" Nelson turned to Morgan. "Morgan, can you tell the story one more time?"

"Sure!" Morgan puffed up his chest, pleased to have another chance to share the tale. "Listen carefully, Wollis."

"All right." Wollis nodded, still smiling. "Let's hear it."

Morgan told the same story from earlier while Almark and Wendy exchanged grins. Wollis listened silently with a calm smile, occasionally nodding—practically a completely different person considering the sharp glares he directed at Almark. This, however, was Wollis's usual self: the friendly class representative.

“I see,” Wollis said after hearing Morgan’s story. “Thank you, Morgan. That was fascinating. You’re a good storyteller.”

Morgan blushed a little at Wollis’s praise.

“Sounds neat, right?” Nelson said, tapping Wollis on the shoulder. “Let’s go check it out tonight.”

“I think I’ll have to pass on that.”

“Why?” Nelson frowned.

Wollis gently patted him on the shoulder. “There’s not much to gain from getting involved in this. At least, not for me.”

He said it to Nelson, but his gaze flicked over to Almark. He had an incendiary look in his eyes, and Almark opened his mouth to speak, but before he could, Wollis turned around.

“Nelson,” Wollis said. “If you’re still going to check it out, you should be careful.”

The next morning, Almark went down to the dining hall and was relieved to find Nelson there, having breakfast. But when he noticed the boy was quite pale, Almark knitted his brows with concern.

“You look kind of sick, Nelson. Are you all right?” he said.

Nelson looked up at him, his eyes bloodshot. “Almark…,” he muttered. “Morgan’s story was real.”

“Huh?”

“Last night, I went to the garden.”

“You actually did it?”

“Of course I did,” Nelson scoffed. “And it was exactly like Morgan said. I heard a voice at the end of the maze.”

“Really?” Almark asked, his eyes wide.

“Yeah. But when I followed the voice through the maze, all I saw was Lord Boruqe’s statue. There wasn’t anyone else there…” Nelson sounded disheartened. “And because of that, I couldn’t sleep…”

“Oh.” Almark nodded in sympathy. “Must have been scary.”

“Huh?” Nelson raised his eyebrows. “Don’t be ridiculous, Almark.”

“Um?”

“It wasn’t scary! If anything, I’m so curious I can’t stop thinking about it! The voice is real, so why didn’t I see who was there?!”

“Oh, so that’s what’s on your mind.”

“I’m so curious it kept me up all night!”

Nelson shoveled more of his breakfast into his mouth. Clearly, last night's events hadn't affected his appetite, so Almark concluded he was probably fine.

"So he actually heard a voice," Wendy said, wide-eyed.

She happened to be walking to the schoolhouse with Almark when he mentioned what Nelson had told him about the garden earlier that morning.

"At least, that's what Nelson claims," said Almark. "Turns out he really heard someone muttering something when the garden was empty."

"And he heard it from the maze, like Morgan said?"

"Apparently. And when he walked to the end of the maze, he reached Lord Boruqe's statue."

"And there was…" Wendy looked at Almark.

"Right." Almark met her gaze and finished for her. "No one there."

"Hm…" Wendy hung her head pensively. "It's all so strange. I'm getting kind of curious…" She glanced at Almark. "I think I'll go check it out tonight, too."

"Huh?" Almark was shocked; he hadn't expected this. "But yesterday you told Nelson it was dangerous."

"Yeah, I did." Wendy brought a finger to her lips. "Except if Nelson also heard the voice, it's not just a rumor anymore. So now I'm curious. Aren't you, Almark?"

"I mean, I guess a little…" Almark faltered, which made Wendy smile.

"And in case I end up in danger, having a strong boy who's good at martial arts around me would definitely put me at ease. Right?"

"Martial arts won't help against ghosts," Almark argued. "You'll need magic for that. And this boy is no good when it comes to magic."

"For now, you mean… But I think that boy will end up becoming a better mage than anyone else here. Also, this curious girl happens to be good at magic," Wendy said with an impish smile.

And so, that night, after dinner, Almark left the dorm with Nelson and Wendy and walked down the trail leading to the garden. After

hearing Morgan and Nelson's stories, the other students seemed determined not to go anywhere near the garden at night, with Lilty in particular running away whenever the matter was brought up.

Going out with lanterns would draw unwanted attention from teachers, so the three of them went outside in their usual outfits without any lanterns and at slightly different times.

Having a mage around is useful at times like these, Almark thought as Wendy walked beside him, holding up a finger and producing a small flame, which then floated away and lit up the road ahead of them.

"I thought you were gonna use an illumination spell, but you cast a will-o-wisp spell instead. Impressive, Wendy," Nelson said.

"This way, both of my hands are free," Wendy explained.

The three of them walked toward the garden, guided by the will-o-wisp's light. The cool night breeze brushed against them.

"It happened around this time yesterday, right?" Almark asked Nelson.

"Yeah, right after dinner. No doubt about it."

Soon, they reached a grove of trees, and the earthen trail they walked on gave way to a flagstone path. They were in the garden.

Almark hardly ever came to the garden at night. He'd expected it to be as dark as the woods had been when he was there with Lilty, but it ended up being surprisingly bright. There was nothing obstructing the moonlight, and the garden's numerous metal lamps contained magic light that kept everything illuminated.

"…It's very bright," Almark noted.

"Right?" Nelson said. "Doesn't feel like a ghost or monster could show up here."

"I'm not sure about that…," Wendy said, her expression stiff. "It's bright for nighttime, but…the brighter the light, the deeper the shadow."

Even with the lamplight, she kept the will-o-wisp out. Almark, who had been walking next to Nelson, stepped aside for a moment.

"Wendy." He gestured between himself and Nelson. "Walk between us."

Wendy nodded and stepped between them. "A dependable man on each arm," she remarked with a giggle.

"If you insist." Almark smiled, and Nelson laughed, looking

pleased with the compliment.

"The Lord Boruqe statue should be past the maze," Nelson remarked, pointing straight ahead confidently.

"You're so brave, Nelson. I can't believe you walked all the way here on your own," Wendy said.

Nelson looked bashful and gave a sheepish "I guess."

Almark wasn't bothered by Wendy praising Nelson, but for some reason, an obstinate, childish corner of his mind thought, *I could've done the same thing. I'm not scared at all*.

This confused him. He knew how immature it sounded, and so he didn't dare speak it aloud.

Before long, the group came upon a wall of shrubbery on the left. It was taller than the three of them were, and there was an opening in it leading inside, just wide enough for someone to pass through. This was the entrance to Lord Boruqe's maze.

"This is the way in… I haven't heard the voice yet today." Nelson cocked his head.

"Did you hear it at this time yesterday?" Almark asked.

"Yeah," Nelson replied instantly. "That's when I ran straight into the maze. I remember that for sure."

"Maybe we should wait a while? Or…" Wendy looked at the boys' faces. "Do we go in immediately?"

"Hmm. I dunno." Nelson hummed indecisively.

"Huh?" Wendy suddenly said. "Isn't that…?"

They saw a lamp's light wavering from the other side of the garden, approaching them.

"Who's that?" Almark whispered.

"Almark, this way," Wendy urged, tugging on Almark's sleeve.

"Huh?"

Nelson was already hiding behind the thicket walls. Suddenly, everything underneath them went dark; Wendy had put out the will-o-wisp. Almark let her pull him away and kneeled under the cover of the thicket.

"Why are we hiding?"

Wendy held a finger to her lips, hushing Almark. Her face was much closer than he realized, which made Almark pause with a start.

The figure approaching them was a young guard. It wasn't

someone Almark knew, but apparently he was on his usual night patrol. The three of them quietly waited for him to walk away. The guard turned a corner, and his heavy footsteps slowly faded into the distance. Only then did Wendy exhale.

"Good," she muttered, relieved.

"They'll scold us if they catch us here. Remember how Wollis told us to be careful?" Nelson said as he got up.

"Oh, I see." Almark nodded and rose to his feet, too. "That's what he meant."

"A verbal warning alone is one thing, but they'd call Miss Maya to tell her we snuck out." Nelson shrugged. "And then we'd get another earful once we got back to the dorms, and then Miss Maya would tell the teachers, and Professor Fia would scold us again the next day in class. So we'd get three sermons for breaking the rules only once."

"That sounds awful," Wendy remarked.

"You can say that again." Nelson looked extremely serious. "It happened to Rado when he went out here at night this one time."

Rado was a boy in their class.

"A guard caught him, and he thought he was doomed, but thankfully it was Zeid, so he got off easy."

"Zeid?" Almark's face lit up upon hearing the name of the one guard he knew. "I know him. But why was Rado better off with Zeid finding him?"

"What do you mean, why?" Nelson said, looking like he didn't want to explain.

"Well, you see, the thing about Zeid is…," Wendy began. "He usually lets students off the hook with only a warning. I mean, unless they do something really bad."

"Zeid just gets it," Nelson concluded. "Even if he does look intimidating at first."

"I know what you mean," Almark said. "Zeid's really nice."

"I'm guessing he must have helped you out, Almark," Wendy said with a smile.

"Yeah, on my first day here. He showed me around."

Come to think of it, Almark hadn't seen Zeid since they parted ways in front of the schoolhouse on his first day of classes. He made a mental note to go pay the front gate a visit later.

But at that moment, all three of them froze.

They heard it.

A small, unintelligible voice. Almark couldn't tell what it was saying, but it was definitely the faint sound of someone talking.

"…It's coming from inside the maze." Wendy looked at the entrance, her expression stiff.

"Yeah," Nelson murmured. "Same as yesterday."

"…Almark?" Wendy asked, her voice tinged with concern. Almark was looking not at the entrance to the maze, but behind them. "What's wrong?"

"It's just…" Almark faced forward. "The wind's blowing."

"Huh? Really?"

"Wind?"

Both Wendy and Nelson were curious.

"Yeah, there's a breeze now, but there wasn't one earlier." Almark glanced back again, and then he eyed the entrance to the maze. "All right. Let's go in."

"Yeah!"

Nelson led the way. As soon as they stepped into the maze, Almark noticed how much darker it was compared to the outside. The hedge walls around them made it impossible to see what was under their feet, and the light of the lamps around the garden didn't extend to the maze's interior. Wendy waved a hand, producing a will-o-wisp that floated above their heads. The magical flame lit up the path at their feet.

"I can still hear it," Nelson whispered.

Almark nodded wordlessly. He couldn't make out what was being said, but there was definitely a soft voice muttering in the distance. It was too far to be clear, but close enough to just be audible. Still, they could tell where it was coming from—deeper in the maze.

"Drat, I can't quite make out what it's saying…" Nelson clicked his tongue.

"Yeah. I feel like an old lady who's hard of hearing," Wendy said.

Almark thought that was a fitting way to put it. He could only hear bits and pieces of vowels, but it really did sound like a sequence of words. And while the location of the voice didn't seem to be changing, it sounded like there was a buzz of noise around it, making it impossible to clearly discern anything. Almark agreed

with Wendy—this must have been what it was like being old and hard of hearing.

Nelson's really brave, though.

Almark was positively impressed with Nelson, who—despite muttering curses under his breath—kept walking forward without slowing down.

"We go right here," he said. "Left at the next corner."

He instructed them on where to go, his voice like a chant. Almark thought the maze was quite winding, and yet…

"Wow, Nelson, you memorized how to get out?" he asked.

Nelson shrugged. "We used to play hide and seek here every day back when we were first-years, so I know the place by heart. I can find my way to any exit in this maze, not just Lord Boruqe's statue."

"The boys love this maze," Wendy added.

After spending over two years at the institute, they knew the place like the backs of their hands.

Almark looked up at the will-o-wisp floating above them. This magic flame wasn't affected by the wind, so it didn't flicker in the slightest as it lit the way for them. Wendy made it look easy, but that only spoke to her mastery of the spell. Almark was honestly astounded by her technique.

Still, the wind he felt earlier bothered him. A slight breeze had been blowing ever since they entered. Given the maze's position at the center of the garden, and the terrain, perhaps…

"Take a right," Nelson said, pulling Almark out of his thoughts. It sounded like the muttering was getting closer. "We're almost there."

"Wow, you didn't get even one turn wrong," Wendy remarked.

"The voice is getting closer, too," Almark said, listening carefully.

Whisper… Whisper… Did… Whisper, whisper… It was… And… Whisper…

It sounded so frustratingly close, like they could very nearly make out the words.

"A left at the gap there."

Nelson pointed at a gap in the hedge. They took a turn there, and suddenly the maze opened up. They had arrived at the very heart of the maze, a small square surrounded by the hedge walls. Set on a plinth in the center of the plaza was the silent image of an old man clad in a robe. This was the statue of the former governor of Norkh

Island, Lord Boruqe.

"The voice…!" Wendy yelped.

Almark couldn't blame her. The voice, which had come across as fragmented just a moment earlier, suddenly became distant the moment they entered the square.

"It's just like yesterday! The voice is getting away!" Nelson shouted and ran to the back of the statue. "Dammit! There's no one there!"

"Maybe it's through this exit?" Wendy suggested.

There were two exits from the plaza; the one they just entered through, and one behind the statue.

"There's nobody there! Did they get away?" Nelson said, frustrated.

"Are you sure?" Wendy asked and tried to peer over the hedge. "Maybe they're hiding."

Seeing the other two look for the source of the voice, Almark realized what had been bothering him all this time.

"…The wind," he whispered and looked down at his feet.

He had been feeling a breeze blowing behind his feet, which were illuminated by the will-o-wisp. But the wind that'd been blowing in one direction thus far had spread out since he entered this plaza. Meaning…

"Wendy! Nelson!" Almark shouted, which made the two jolt and turn to look at him. "Gather the wind here!"

"The wind…?"

"You can do that, right? Focus all the wind blowing through this plaza."

Nelson looked confused, but Wendy soon said, "The wind bending spell, Nelson!"

"Huh? O-oh, right."

Wendy was quick to act. "Sorry, it's about to get really dark," she warned.

She snapped her fingers, putting out the will-o-wisp. Next, she spread her arms and cast a wind-bending spell. Unlike a spell that produced wind, this one changed the direction existing winds blew in.

"Ugh, we just learned this spell. I'm not sure I can cast it right…," Nelson muttered as he followed Wendy's example.

They really are a bunch of little geniuses.

Almark could feel the wind that blew past this plaza gather around them.

"The voice!" Wendy exclaimed in surprise. "I can hear it!"

"Me, too!" Nelson shouted.

The voice that had become distant rapidly grew more audible.

"Nelson, keep the wind blowing this way," Wendy quickly instructed. "I'll blow it in from the opposite direction. Then, we'll gather the voice here!"

She then turned around and spread out her arms. The two gusts of wind met in the center of the plaza, making the voice clearer than ever before.

"So you know what I thought? Staying here would just make us hungry, so we should go back to the dorm. And then Lilty said…"

It was the sweet, fawning voice of a girl. The trio looked between each other, because it didn't just sound vaguely familiar—it was distinctly the voice of someone they all knew very well.

"…Norish," Wendy whispered.

At the dorm, when Norish was suddenly visited by the three of them, she went very red and started stuttering about how embarrassed she was.

"You all heard me talking? I can't believe myself! Forget what you heard!"

"How can I forget?! You kept me up all night because of how much it bothered me!" Nelson snapped at her.

"Then don't listen to me and don't get bothered by it!" Norish snapped back.

"Any man would get curious about a mysterious voice, you know! Well, any man but Morgan!" Nelson argued unreasonably.

Almark and Wendy got between the two and tried to smooth things over.

"Norish, I know you're good at wind magic, but…," Wendy said as she pushed Nelson away by the shoulders. "I had no idea you could do the Wind's Whispers spell. I thought they only learn that in the intermediate division. That's amazing."

"I'm still practicing, so I haven't mastered it yet…," Norish muttered peevishly, but overall she seemed to accept the praise.

The Wind's Whispers spell allowed one to send their voice and words to someone else in the distance. It took time to travel, but skilled practitioners could send messages with their own voices across even the sea. This made it sound like extremely useful magic, but since the spell involved sending wind to where a person would be, the recipient would have to be at that specific point to hear the words. This made it quite difficult to use.

"So, why were you using a Wind's Whispers spell to send your idle chatter into the maze?" Nelson shoved his face past Wendy and asked the question in a deliberately provocative manner.

"What do you mean, idle chatter?!" As expected, Norish was incensed.

"You heard what I said!"

"Stop it, both of you!" Wendy pushed Nelson away again.

"But why did you cast the Wind's Whispers spell at Lord Boruqe's statue?" Almark asked, standing behind the two.

Norish hung her head bashfully. "It doesn't…mean anything…"

"Lies!" Nelson chimed in.

"I said stop it!" Wendy snapped.

"So you have your reasons. It's okay if you don't want to tell us," Almark said. "But when I heard your whispers… Norish, the way you talked… I mean, I haven't known you for long so I can't really say, but it was like…"

Wendy turned around to look at Almark. Nelson did the same, curious to see what he'd come up with.

"…your voice was really kind and gentle… Yeah. It was like you were talking to a grandfather you really love."

Norish gulped, which Nelson instantly spotted.

"Norish, are you…Lord Boruqe's granddaughter or something?" he asked.

"No, you dolt!" Norish hollered and turned to look at Almark. "You're a strange one, Almark. It's like you can see right through me."

"It's just the impression I got, is all."

"Do you have time to go out to the garden again?" Norish said, glancing into the room.

Almark glanced over her shoulder and saw Lilty facing the desk. Right; Norish was her roommate.

“Can we talk over there?” Norish asked before shutting the door behind her.

It was much darker the second time they visited the garden. Nelson cast an illumination spell in his hand, and the four friends walked in silence. Before long, they arrived at the maze’s entrance, and after walking through it for a while, Norish spoke up.

“…Back when I was a first-year, people teased me a lot for being a crybaby. Eston and Porois, especially.”

She mentioned two boys Almark wasn’t familiar with.

“They’re a couple of really mean boys,” Wendy told Almark. “Both are in Class 3 now.”

“I have a bit of a harsh tongue, but I cry at the drop of a hat, so they kept having fun at my expense. They’d bully me pretty much every day.”

Nelson guided them silently, lighting the way with his spell.

“When I’d come back from class, I was so hurt and angry I always wanted to cry, but my roommate, Lilty, was really lonely too, and I didn’t want her to see me like that.”

Almark listened to Norish’s story wordlessly. Lilty had mentioned that she cried all the time during her first year because she missed her parents. Did Lilty notice Norish was crying every day, too?

Nelson’s flame gave the occasional crackle.

“One day, I went into the maze on a whim. I thought I could cry here, and no one would spot me. But since the boys played here all the time, I never ended up doing that …”

She must have meant Nelson and his friends.

“But then I discovered something incredible.”

Nelson silently turned left at the opening in the thicket, and the others followed.

“And that was…*him*.”

They reached the central plaza, and Norish looked up at Lord Boruqe’s statue.

“I never noticed it until then, but when I looked up at it that day, I realized…he looks a lot like my dead grandpa. I always loved him.”

Norish was from a relatively wealthy farmer’s family and had a beloved grandfather. He was originally a scholar, but for as long as

Norish could remember, he had been retired and simply worked on his farm. He wore a robe every day and needed glasses because of his old age. He lived the best of his golden years with his nose always in a book.

"So when we got the news I could enter the institute, Grandpa was the happiest out of everyone."

Norish explained, with a very soft voice, that her beloved grandfather passed away before she entered the institute, and that the Lord Boruqe statue looked just like him.

"Obviously, it's not exactly the same if you look at the little details. But at the time, the only thing on my mind was, 'Grandpa is right here!'"

After that, Norish would go see "Grandpa" whenever she felt down. In their second year, the classes were shuffled, and her bullies were sent to another class, meaning she didn't have to cry as much. But the habit stuck.

Since Norish had a knack for wind magic, she had recently started experimenting with the Wind's Whispers spell, and decided to send her messages to "Grandpa."

"I just told him whatever came to mind. What I had for dinner, what happened that day, I'd tell Grandpa about anything. I'd use the window in my room to send my words through the wind."

Norish would no doubt have done the same if her grandfather were still alive, but she was so embarrassed she always waited for when Lilty was out, and since she was still practicing the Wind's Whispers spell, her messages ended up fragmented, or they would either fail to reach Lord Boruqe's statue or disperse the moment they did.

"So that's how the mysterious voice happened…," Wendy whispered. "But Almark, I'm surprised you figured out it was the wind, though."

"Yeah, I just figured since the maze was covered in hedges, the only place the wind would be blowing would be at our feet. But I felt a weak breeze on us the whole time. And based on the garden's terrain, I thought the central plaza would be where the wind would gather the easiest. So I thought, maybe… But in the end, the reason the wind gathered there was because Norish sent it. I didn't consider magic at all."

“No, I think it was impressive. That kind of perspective is important,” Wendy said. “Besides, Nelson and I didn’t notice the breeze.”

“I didn’t expect this to end up becoming that kind of ghost story,” Norish muttered bashfully. “I guess I should rethink how I practice…”

“Awww!” Nelson suddenly exclaimed. “I was thinking I’d get to go on a manly adventure, but it was all just magic in the end!”

“Hey, Nelson, you shouldn’t put it like that,” Wendy chided, but Nelson ignored her and made right for the exit.

“And Norish, if you want to practice magic to talk to your ‘Grandpa’, that’s fine!” he said, his back turned to them. “But if you need someone to lend you an ear, you could always just talk to us!”

“Huh?”

“You said it was Eston and Porois, right? I’m looking forward to seeing those two doofuses in the martial arts tournament!” Nelson then walked off, not looking back at the other three. “Come on, let’s head back! Can’t believe we wasted our time coming here.”

“Hey, Nelson, why do you have to put it like that?” Almark groused, but Wendy tugged on his arm.

When he looked at her, she giggled and whispered, “Remember how his light spell wavered on the way here? Nelson got pretty mad when he heard Norish was bullied.”

Almark did remember the way Nelson’s flame crackled and wavered occasionally. That was because his heart was wavering.

“It’s how he expresses his friendship… Even if it is a little hard to tell,” Wendy explained, to which Norish smiled.

“Back in our first year, Nelson called out to me when I was crying in the maze here. We were in different classes then, so he was just a stranger to me. But he invited me to play hide and seek with a really carefree smile. I was so startled I ended up saying no, but honestly, it made me happy.”

“So from now on…”

“Yeah. Maybe I can talk to him, but…” Norish trailed off for a moment, her expression composed. “I’m not sure if he’s exactly dependable.”

Almark looked at Nelson walking away, uncertain he’d heard her correctly. As far as he could tell, Nelson seemed like a pretty

dependable person.

“Wait up, Nelson!” Almark called. “Let’s go back together!”

“I’m good. You can go before me,” Nelson said without turning around. “Make sure you walk the two of them back.”

Nelson’s flame grew distant. Wendy, still giggling, produced a flame of her own to light the way back.

A few days passed after the voice in the garden incident. During the morning, Almark walked along the road from the dorm to the schoolhouse.

“Almark!” someone called out from behind.

Turning around, Almark saw a boy, roughly a head shorter than him, looking up at him.

“Oh, hey, Eldo.” Almark smiled. “Good morning.”

The boy smiled and greeted him back. “Heading to class?”

“Yeah.”

“Can you use some magic now?”

“No, not yet…”

“Still nothing? Are you sure you’re a third-year?”

This lively boy was Eldo, a first-year who had joined the elementary division that spring.

“Oh, it’s Almark!”

A small girl wearing a robe—more like the robe was wearing her—hurried over from behind Eldo and caught up to them.

“Good morning, Cecily,” Almark said.

“A fine day to you,” the girl, Cecily, replied with an elegant noble’s greeting.

“Hey, Cecily, Almark here hasn’t learned a single spell yet,” Eldo said immediately.

Cecily frowned. “Oh, really? You poor thing. A third-year who can’t cast any spells…” She worried over something that bothered Almark quite a bit.

Almark met Eldo and Cecily after getting permission from Fia to sit in on the first-years’ meditation classes. For some reason, the two

of them took a liking to Almark and started chatting with him—which meant he ended up making very little progress on his meditation that day. One could very well say he was driven out of that class because of them.

That was when Eldo and Cecily apparently deemed Almark as inferior to them. Ever since, they acted like they were his seniors whenever they saw him in the dorms or the schoolhouse. This never failed to put Nelson and Morgan into hysterics.

"Work hard, Almark," said Eldo. "I'll have you know we recently learned how to cast a fog spell."

"I, for my part, was able to produce some smoke from my hand the other day," Cecily said proudly.

"I really feel like I'll be able to fill a whole room with fog soon. I'll be going to practice in the woods after class today. As for you, Almark, remember that meditation is the basis of all magic. Learn from us and keep working."

Eldo sounded so much like Illmis, Almark couldn't help but crack a strained smile. The younger boy must have been at an age where he longed to teach others.

"Yeah, thanks…"

Whenever Almark walked with first-years, he had to slow his pace since his strides were longer than theirs. Because of this, the other students ended up overtaking him. If it was students he didn't know, that was one thing, but having someone he knew see him getting sermons from first-years felt a bit awkward.

And indeed, Leila walked past him, her face expressionless and icy.

Just as he was about to bid Eldo and Cecily farewell and pick up the pace, he heard an arrogant "ha!" from behind. Almark turned around to see Tohrk sneering, followed as always by Garain and Deg.

"Good morning, Tohrk," Almark said.

Tohrk simply ignored him. "I feel bad for you two, having to babysit this brat first thing in the morning," he told Eldo and Cecily.

"We're not babysitting him," Eldo replied.

Tohrk then glanced at Almark and lowered his voice. "He's a real tragic case. Can't cast a single spell yet. Make sure to teach him

well."

Eldo and Cecily nodded obediently. Tohrk walked past Almark, holding back sneering laughter.

"…Does he make fun of you in class, Almark?" Eldo asked once Tohrk and his cronies were a good distance away.

"No, not really," Almark answered indifferently.

Eldo exchanged a look with Cecily. "We should try to get along with him better."

"Yes, those third-years looked quite mean. You must feel terrible being in the same class with them, Almark. Indeed, you're unlucky every which way…," Cecily said in a rather patronizing manner.

And while Almark did feel that this was none of their business, he could tell they genuinely liked him, which made him think twice about bluntly remarking on it. They were discreet enough to only speak up when Tohrk was out of earshot, after all.

"If anything happens, let us know!" Eldo told him.

Almark replied with a forced nod and a smile.

"Hey, Almark."

That day, during a break between classes, Morgan approached Almark, his pudgy form jiggling.

"Hey, Morgan." Almark looked up from his textbook and smiled. "Something wrong?"

"Hm." Morgan looked around the room for a second.

Wendy was usually seated next to Almark, but she was currently outside the classroom with the other girls.

Upon confirming she was out of sight, Morgan returned his gaze to Almark. "Remember how I told you the other day I saw this weird shadow on the way to the schoolhouse?"

"That day you overslept, right?"

"Yeah, let's not go into that…" Morgan's shoulders twitched. "So, I actually saw another weird shadow."

"You did?" Almark frowned. "When?"

"The day before yesterday."

"Two days ago…" Almark's eyes widened. "Did you tell anyone about it?"

"No." Morgan shook his head. "You're the first person I've mentioned it to."

“Then why didn’t you say something until now?”

“I thought people would say I was imagining or seeing things again…” Morgan slumped his shoulders. “But you listened to me last time, so I thought I could tell you.”

“I can tell if someone’s lying by looking at their eyes,” Almark replied. “Besides, I don’t think you were imagining things.”

“Huh?” Morgan blinked. “Why?”

“I mean…”

Almark started to answer, but then Wendy started making her way back to her seat, chatting happily with the other girls.

“Oh, no good!” Morgan shushed Almark. “Keep it a secret!”

“Why?”

“Isn’t it obvious?!” Morgan shuddered. “Just the other day, it turned out that the voice in the garden’s maze was actually someone practicing wind magic, right?”

“Oh…”

“And Nelson kept teasing me and saying no way the statue was talking.”

“But Wendy wouldn’t tease you.”

Morgan looked embarrassed. “It’s just that I keep believing rumors and end up humiliating myself because of it.”

“I think believing people isn’t a bad thing on its own.” Almark patted Morgan on the shoulder and steered the conversation back on track. “So, you saw the shadow between the schoolhouse and the dorm?”

“No, it was near the entrance to the woods.”

“The woods…”

Almark felt an ominous chill and frowned. The sound of the flute he’d heard the other night was still lingering in his mind.

“That’s a little concerning.” Almark then brought his face closer to Morgan and whispered, “What did that shadow look like?”

“I think it was a little bigger than me. Some bushes were shaking, and then I saw a large, dark shadow there. It really startled me.”

“Right.”

“So I was too scared to look any closer. I, um…” Morgan cast down his eyes. “Maybe I was just imagining things.”

“Morgan, you wouldn’t have imagined the bushes shaking. There must have been something there, and you saw it.”

Morgan looked up at Almark.

"I don't think you were imagining things," Almark told him again.

"I wasn't imagining things…," Morgan repeated. He looked perplexed. "You said that before, Almark. What makes you think that?"

"So earlier, you said you saw a shadow between the dorm and the schoolhouse for a split second."

"Yeah."

"And you saw it move from the corner of your eye, right?"

"That's right."

"How big was it?"

"I think that one was a little bigger than me, too."

Almark smiled. "See? That's what I mean."

"Huh?" Morgan looked confused. "I don't follow."

"Normally, when you see something from the corner of your eye, you don't really notice how big it is. You've got keen eyes, Morgan."

Morgan blinked a few times. "That's the first time someone's ever said a thing like that about me."

"Did you see anything else?"

"Not after that…," Morgan began, but then he trailed off like he remembered something. "I saw…claws."

"Claws?" Almark stared at Morgan, who hummed, trying to remember.

"The shadow I saw this time had long claws. I don't think the first one I saw back then did, though."

"I see… So the two shadows might be different, and you saw them in different places, too."

"Yeah, I… Maybe. I think." Morgan cocked his head, looking uncertain.

"Thanks for telling me, Morgan." Almark smiled. "I'll mention it to the teachers so that they can tell everyone to be careful."

"No, no, don't make a big deal out of it." Morgan waved a hand. "You just lending me an ear is enough."

"All right."

"You really are strange, you know?" He looked at Almark with wonder. "Thanks for listening."

Morgan returned to his seat, and Wendy showed up and elbowed

Almark.

"Ooh, did Morgan come to you for advice?"

"It wasn't anything serious" was Almark's vague reply. "I think he's just not confident enough in himself."

"Huh?" Wendy blinked in confusion but eventually decided against pursuing the matter any further. "Yeah, you're right. He's a really nice boy." Settling into her seat, she smiled at Morgan's round back. "Maybe a little too nice, and that keeps him from stepping forward."

"I can see that," said Almark. "Listening to you makes everything make sense. Thanks."

"Don't exaggerate." She shook her head. "You're a fast learner, so I don't think there's a lot I can teach you, actually."

Almark smiled at her. "You're the one exaggerating here, Wendy."

It was dusk, just as the early summer sun was beginning to dip into the sea in the horizon. Almark finished his supplementary lessons and left the magic training area. He was surprised to find that despite Illmis spending a great deal of time with him, there was still some afterglow in the western sky.

Despite this, with the canopy of the treetops obscuring the sun, the road back to the dorm was dark. Every day, Almark attended his classes and supplementary lessons before returning to his room to practice meditation and prepare for class—even if it meant cutting into his sleeping time. This routine was difficult for Almark, in a way that differed from the hardships of battle and travel. Bit by bit, the fatigue of grinding routine wore Almark down.

I've got plenty of work to do when I get back to my room…, Almark thought as he walked down the path with nothing to light the way.

Suddenly, he spotted a small ball of light approaching him from the direction of the dorms. It must have been a lantern, but it was being carried a bit too high to be in the hands of a student. Squinting through the darkness, Almark recognized a familiar face.

"Oh!" he called out. "Zeid!"

"Is that you, Almark?" Zeid approached him, only recognizing Almark in the dark once he heard his voice. His tone brightened instantly. "I haven't seen you since you started classes. You been doing well?"

“I have.” Almark smiled. “Thank you for all your help back then.”

“Oh, not at all.” Zeid smiled back. “I’m glad you’re fitting in.”

Zeid stopped in his tracks, and Almark noted he was still in his guard uniform.

“Nighttime patrol?”

“Yeah, I’m on duty tonight. I need to go inspect the entrance to the woods.”

“All the way there?” Almark asked, surprised. “That must be rough.”

“Oh, it’s not too bad. Especially with the weather being nice recently,” Zeid said gently as he turned his lamp in the direction of the forest. “But recently there’s been some suspicious activity in the woods, so Professor Fia asked us to be extra vigilant about it.”

“Oh…” Almark nodded.

He’d told Fia about the flute he heard when he was in the woods with Lilty, and she must have taken his report seriously.

“We’ve been patrolling more often because of that.”

“You must be working hard,” Almark said, noting to himself that he should tell Nelson to try to not go out at night for a while.

“Were you studying all evening, Almark?”

“Yes. Professor Illmis is giving me supplementary lessons.”

“Is he now…?” Zeid nodded. “I guess that makes sense. You must have a lot to cover if you’re going to catch up with the other third-years.”

“Right.”

Before long, the conversation naturally turned to the day they first met.

“I was surprised back then, you know. A student showing up out of nowhere, asking to join the institute. I didn’t know what to say.”

Almark smiled sheepishly, remembering their talk by the gate. “Honestly, I was just so emotional that I’d finally made it to the institute. Being told to turn back and leave made me desperate.”

“I can imagine.” Zeid nodded earnestly. “When I heard you came all the way from the North, I realized why you were so desperate.”

“I’m glad you let me in, Zeid. You saved my life.”

“Oh, stop.” Zeid shook his head, which made the lantern in his hand waver. “It’s a good thing I don’t have the authority to send a student like you back home.” He looked at Almark. “I mean, you

spent two years traveling here all the way from the North," Zeid added with the utmost respect for Almark. "All that way, with nothing but that longsword on your back."

Zeid's expression darkened as he recalled how heavy Almark's sword was. The cold glint of the blade he'd seen in Almark's room in turn reminded him that Almark was the son of an infamous Northern mercenary. Not only that, Zeid himself had been the one to urge Almark to keep his background a secret while at the institute.

"How have things been going, by the way?" Zeid asked hesitantly. "Getting along with your classmates?"

"They've been very kind to me." Almark smiled. "Every day, they help me out in all sorts of ways."

"That's great." Zeid looked relieved. "Really, I'm glad to hear that."

"Which reminds me, Professor Fia mentioned you."

"Huh?!" Zeid exclaimed. "Me? She talked about me?"

"She did."

"What did she say?"

"That she'd been running into you on patrol more often lately."

"Oh…" Zeid scratched his head. "Right. I wonder why… Ah-ha-ha…" He stared questioningly at Almark. "Is that all Professor Fia said about me?"

"Yes."

Zeid dropped his shoulders. "Figures." But then he regained his spirits and looked back at Almark. "Well, if you're ever in trouble, Almark, you can come to me at the gate."

"Thank you." Almark beamed.

Relieved by that smile, Zeid looked up at the darkening sky. "Anyway, I should get back to work."

"Right. Be careful, Zeid."

Waving goodbye, Almark watched Zeid leave and resumed his trek to the dorms. Seeing Zeid reminded him of how he felt on his first day at the institute.

The first day he put on the uniform robes. The day he had to start hiding the fact he was a mercenary's son.

Right… I went as far as keeping Father's profession a secret in order to enroll here. And I did all of it… Almark took a deep breath. *…so I*

could become a mage.

He took a lungful of Southern air—warm and soft—and slowly exhaled. It calmed his thoughts.

The place I'm in now, and every day I spend working in these robes. How much closer am I to being a mage?

Every day is full of unknowns, and I keep relying on Wendy and Nelson, asking them questions all the time. Professor Illmis spends time giving me extra lessons, but it doesn't feel like my meditation's improved much.

I traveled to this institute all on my own, but now that I'm here, I can't do anything by myself. No matter what I try to do, I have to rely on my friends and teachers.

I know that it's not my fault, but still. I want to be strong enough that I won't need to rely on others.

Assuming I can even be of use to someone…

Almark recalled the position he was in and cracked a strained smile before continuing down the dark path to the dorms.

A few days later, after school, Almark went to ask Illmis for permission to go into the woods to collect herbs for class the next day. The sun was still high in the sky. Normally, he'd go right to meditation training, so walking to the woods under bright sunlight made for a new, unusual take on the road there.

As he walked to the woods, he watched the first-years running about cheerfully while the second- and third-years chatted or practiced spells, each forming groups in their own spots. As he got closer to the woods, the groups of students became sparser. Those who went into the forest were grouped up around streams or in open fields.

"…Mm?"

But then, Almark spotted a petite figure running from the direction of the woods. It was someone quite familiar…

"Cecily?"

It was the first-year girl, Cecily, running desperately. Her shoulders rose and fell as she struggled for air.

"Cecily, what's wrong?" Almark called out.

Once Cecily caught sight of him, her face fell, and large tears spilled from her eyes.

Almark ran over to her. “What happened?”

“Eldo… Eldo…”

“Calm down, Cecily. What’s going on with Eldo?” Almark asked. He could tell that something serious was going on.

“A-a monster… A monster dragged him away…”

Almark’s eyes widened in shock. Cecily toppled into Almark’s chest, like she couldn’t stay upright anymore.

“Almark, please, you have to help Eldo…”

“You’re sure it was a monster?”

A monster, when it was still this bright out? Almark doubted Cecily at first. Maybe she was only imagining things, like first-year girls often did. Maybe it was a harmless prank the boys pulled on her. All sorts of possibilities crossed Almark’s mind until he remembered what Morgan told him the other day.

A shadow near the entrance to the woods. A long-clawed shadow.

Maybe Cecily was right. In which case, he couldn’t afford to hesitate.

“Cecily, what kind of monster was it?” Almark gently held her by the shoulders, trying to keep his voice as calm as possible so as to not frighten her.

“What kind…? I don’t know. It was a monster. The big and scary sort,” Cecily said in between sobs. But her answer didn’t help.

“What color was it? Was it human, did it look like a dog?” Almark asked patiently. He wanted to run into the woods right then and there, but he knew he needed to get at least some information first.

“I don’t know. I was so scared… I didn’t really get a good look at it…” Cecily shook her head.

Almark kneeled down and looked her in the eye. “Cecily, you have to keep your cool. You’re a mage, remember? I’ll save Eldo—I promise. But I need you to tell me what you saw.”

You’re a mage. Those words seemed to resonate with Cecily. She stared at Almark, her large eyes full of tears; he met her gaze and nodded. Cecily’s eyes wavered, like she was trying to sift through her memories.

“You can do it, Cecily.”

The girl’s eyes swam a little more until she gingerly replied, “…It had brown fur… It was about as tall as an intermediate student. And it had horns…I think.”

“All right. Good work.” Almark got to his feet. “You go back to the schoolhouse and call a teacher. I’ll run ahead to the woods. Can you make it back on your own?”

Cecily nodded stoutly.

“Good. Hurry, then.”

Almark turned around and saw a familiar trio walking over leisurely.

“Tohrk!”

Tohrk and his two friends froze upon hearing Almark suddenly call his name. But Tohrk soon replied with his usual sarcasm.

“What, playing around with first-years again? Guess it suits you.”

“Eldo got snatched away by a monster!” Almark yelled, ignoring Tohrk’s taunting.

“A monster?” Tohrk blinked in surprise.

“I’ll go ahead to the woods. Go call a teacher and look after Cecily here, okay?”

“W-wait, hold on! I don’t understand!” Tohrk cried, flustered, but Almark continued speaking.

“Sorry, but if she saw what I think she saw, we can’t let even a minute go to waste. There’s no time to explain.”

Tohrk stared at Almark’s face, taken aback. “A monster snatched a first-year… Okay, but what are you going into the woods for…?”

“To get Eldo out of there. And defeat the monster, if I have to,” Almark answered concisely.

“Defeat the monster…?” Tohrk whispered.

“Tohrk, please,” Almark said one last time before turning around and taking off toward the woods.

Tohrk scowled and clicked his tongue. He turned to Garain and Deg, who were both stunned.

“You two, go with this girl and call a teacher. It’s urgent.”

“Huh?” The pair stared at him in shock. “Wh-what about you?”

“What do you think?” Tohrk huffed. “That idiot thinks he can do anything except for magic, but he doesn’t know the first thing about the woods. I have to go with him!”

Almark bolted into the woods, found an appropriately sized tree branch, and snapped it off. He swung it once through the air, checking how it felt in his hand; his mind wandered to the

longsword back in his room, but that was a lost cause. Even a mere tree branch was better than going in empty-handed.

"Hey, wait up!" a voice called out to Almark from behind.

Almark turned around to see Tohrk running after him, short of breath.

"Tohrk? Why are you here? What about Cecily?"

Still gasping for air, Tohrk caught up to Almark. "You're way too damn fast…," he spat, glaring at Almark. "I had Garain and Deg take the first-year back."

Almark didn't seem to be catching on, so Tohrk clicked his tongue.

"You're gonna beat the monster while I just call for a teacher? Who the hell do you think you are?" He wiped the sweat from his forehead and laid into Almark, grimacing. "What, did you think saying 'monster' was going to scare me and send me running to the teachers for help? Don't you dare make a mockery of me. If one of the younger students has been snatched by a monster, I'm not going to leave you to handle it. You can't cast a single spell, and you don't even know your way around these woods. No way in hell you're doing this alone."

Almark stared at Tohrk in shock.

"Is that how it sounded to you?" Almark asked. "Tohrk, there's nothing wrong with having some pride, but pride won't keep you safe from danger."

Tohrk scoffed at him. "What would you even know?"

This must be his pride as a member of the nobility, thought Almark. Almark remembered the knights he saw fighting in the North. And maybe it was true—perhaps a mercenary couldn't relate to how a knight felt.

"Fine, let's go together," Almark said. "But if you're coming with me, you have to look after yourself, all right?"

"Shut up. I should be saying that to you."

The two started running again, side by side this time.

"Do you have any idea where to go?" Tohrk asked between gasps for air.

"There aren't any dens that monsters can use in the shallow parts of the woods, so I thought I should go further in…," Almark answered, his breathing as steady as ever.

“Idiot,” Tohrk spat. “It’s a good thing I’m here, then. If you went in blindly like that, you could have days to search and still turn up nothing. The woods are deep, and there’s multiple trails leading there.”

“All right. Do you have any ideas?”

“The first-years usually practice magic near that field. If we can find the monster’s footsteps, then maybe…”

“Okay, let’s go there.”

Almark instantly changed direction and ran up the hill, his speed not changing in the slightest.

“Hey, wait…! Dammit, why is he so fast?!”

Tohrk finally caught up to Almark, who was already picking up one of the bags left discarded in the field.

“This is Eldo’s.” Almark pointed to a set of distinctly non-human footprints on the ground. “I knew it; Cecily was right. She must have been terrified. That girl is strong.”

“What…did she see…?” Tohrk asked, wheezing in an attempt to catch his breath.

“Based on what Cecily told me, and these footprints, plus the shadow Morgan saw…”

“What shadow?” Tohrk frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“A while ago, Morgan saw a shadow near the entrance to the woods. He said it had claws.”

“You believe anything Morgan says?” Tohrk scoffed. “It’s just one of his made-up stories.”

“No.” Almark shook his head. “Morgan looked dead serious when he told me. I’m certain he saw it.”

“So what if he was serious? Who would take a coward like him seriously?”

“I would,” Almark said firmly, which made Tohrk frown.

“Fine, suit yourself,” he spat. “So? He saw a monster with claws. So what?”

“I think I know what monster attacked Eldo.” Almark looked down at the footprints. “These three claws all point to one monster. It has to be a jaranon.”

Tohrk’s eyes widened. “A jaranon?”

“Yeah. It’s a vile ogre that makes its home in forests. It has horns

and one eye. It's small, but very powerful, and when provoked it uses its long claws to attack and eat humans."

"A jaranon, you say…" Tohrk mouthed its name again, glancing down at the footprints.

All he had was the vague mental image of a monster as something scary but inexplicable, but Almark's description made it seem much more real and tangible.

"But we still have hope," Almark said, which made Tohrk look up in surprise.

"What do you mean?"

"Jaranons prefer fresh meat. They usually kill their prey when they take it back to their den. That means Eldo's still alive."

The fact a monster would emerge in broad daylight was something he didn't expect, but Almark found some hope in the monster's tendencies. Jaranons were vicious creatures, but they were still only normal monsters that made their homes in the woods. They weren't driven by an indiscriminate, inexhaustible urge to kill humans like dark monsters were.

Almark explained all this calmly, his eyes still fixed on the footprints.

Tohrk looked at him with a grave expression. "You sure know a lot about monsters."

"If I could have it my way, I wouldn't know anything about them. But I have to, if I'm going to survive." Almark started running again, following the monster's prints. "Let's finish this before it gets dark. Follow me."

"Argh, wait up! Stop running off, you brute!" Tohrk yelled, but then he slapped a hand over his mouth. "Uh, forget I said that. Seriously, use your head. You have a mage with you."

Tohrk moved his fingers in elaborate motions, like he was plucking an instrument. His motions were delicate in a way Almark wouldn't have expected from his usual demeanor. Then, the monster's footsteps started to glow a faint yellow.

"What did you do…?" Almark asked.

"I applied color to the monster's scent. That should make it easier to find. Come on, let's go."

Meanwhile, outside the woods…

Morgan was going for a stroll between the woods and the schoolhouse, but he stopped in his tracks when he saw Garain and Deg walking with a first-year girl. He was surprised to see the girl was in tears.

"Uh, Deg, Garain, what happened? Did she get hurt?"

"No, she's not hurt," Deg replied tiredly. He quickly explained the situation.

"Huh?" Morgan went pale in the face. "A monster…?"

"Yeah. It's weird. I've never heard of monsters coming out of the woods here," Deg said.

"But it's true!" Cecily insisted tearfully. "One really came out, and it dragged Eldo away!"

"I'm not saying you're lying…" Deg scratched his head, looking bothered. "Anyway, Morgan, that's the story, so we need to hurry to the schoolhouse and let a teacher know."

"And Almark went after the monster with Tohrk?"

"Yeah. I know those guys are strong, but it's still a monster they're up against. I just hope they don't do anything reckless."

Morgan gulped.

"Anyway, we have to get going."

Deg and Garain headed for the schoolhouse with Cecily in tow.

Morgan looked toward the woods, his face very pale. This place, which he'd been to so many times and thought he was used to, suddenly felt foreign and menacing.

Almark and Tohrk are in there to save the first-year who got kidnapped by a monster… A monster… The same one I saw…

Morgan's mind churned with regrets.

What if I'd told a teacher about what I saw? Or not even a teacher—what if I told the others about it? Maybe I could have stopped this. They might not have believed me, though. Actually, if only I'd had the courage to look closer when I noticed the bushes shaking, I could've been absolutely sure that what I saw was a monster.

This is all my fault.

Morgan bit his lip.

Either way, I have to go to the woods!

He then calmed his shaking body and took off running.

Almark raced through the woods. The pale trail of yellow light

continued intermittently into the trees. The footprints vanished at times, but Tohrk's spell kept the two boys from getting lost. Although the monster's smell didn't linger in the air for very long, it clung to wherever the monster stepped or touched directly, leaving faint markers for Almark and Tohrk to follow.

The monster naturally didn't stick to any trails a human would take, moving freely through tickets and animal trails. Tohrk, who ran behind Almark, could only stare in amazement as Almark traversed the slopes and thickets, smoothly weaving through the complex patterns of branches extending from every direction without ever losing speed.

Almark moved from one glowing marker to the next, his unusual stamina and speed on full display, and Tohrk was having trouble just catching up to him. He felt the urge to call out for him to stop and slow down, but he held his tongue. He knew they couldn't afford to lose even a second in this situation; an underclassman's life could be in danger if they didn't catch up to him in time. Plus, it was Tohrk who had insisted on coming along, so he wouldn't ask Almark to slow down—no matter what. He'd just need to grit his teeth and bear with it.

He could only bitterly wonder what kind of training Almark had endured to attain such monstrous athletic ability. It was like he was peerless in every field but magic. Then there were the scary fencing abilities he showed in martial arts class. And it wasn't just fencing, he was shrewd and quick on his feet. It was like he was good at everything.

And as far as magic goes…

As he wiped the torrent of sweat from his forehead, Tohrk thought back to that flame spell Almark accidently triggered. He'd never seen someone produce flames that big without any training. What's more, Almark had even returned to his dorm room that same day, looking none the worse for wear.

Tohrk looked up ahead and saw Almark getting further away.

He's going to beat me at magic, too, someday.

Tohrk thought back to his hometown. To House Shifei. To the humiliation and the vows of his childhood.

Eyes, all around me. Eyes, staring at me. Eyes, cold and sneering. Eyes, eyes, eyes.

That image was linked with the memories of his hometown.

But I won't look away from them. I'll haughtily stare back at each and every one. And until I can do that, I'll put in whatever effort I have to.

That was the oath he made, and indeed, how he tried to live his life.

That's why I should be every bit as strong as he is. It's why I worked so hard until now—to be so strong everyone will just know it. Just like him.

But did I really do it? I thought I had talent, that I put in all the effort. But looking at him just makes me feel like a nobody. It makes me feel pathetic.

"Dammit!" Tohrk spat.

Almark didn't even turn to look at him. Tohrk ran as fast as he could, following the trail of glowing path markers lit up by his own spell, but Almark was growing more and more distant.

He keeps sprinting toward his goal, never looking away. Never letting needless thoughts cloud his judgment, never caring what others think. Only a select few can do that. You could say it's just a matter of character, but even that's a sort of talent.

But at least at this moment, Tohrk was grateful that Almark was who he was. If the boy had turned around and spoken to Tohrk in concern, Tohrk would have blown up and tried to smack him.

He'll beat me at magic eventually. And when he does, he won't even turn around to make sure I'm still there anymore. He'll just surpass me like it's effortless for him and keep running ahead.

It made him feel insignificant, and acknowledging that was unbearably humiliating. But Almark simply kept running ahead, paying no heed to Tohrk's conflicted heart.

Tohrk gritted his teeth.

If I really wasn't as good as him, I'd accept this humiliation. But he's not there yet. Right now, I'm still leagues ahead of him when it comes to magic, Tohrk told himself. *I'm not going to sit here and wait for him to get better than me. I'll keep running, too, as fast as I can. No, I'll outrun him. I swear it on House Shifei's name.*

His expression desperate, Tohrk ran at full speed so as not to lose sight of Almark.

"I see it."

Almark stopped in his tracks. He had followed the trail of light up a slope, which led to a long, gentle descent that offered a view of what lay ahead. With this vantage point, he could see a one-horned ogre a short distance away, carrying a robed boy under its arm. Its body emitted a faint yellowish glow, proving Tohrk's spell extended to the ogre itself.

Almark was impressed. Despite all this running, Tohrk had maintained the spell the whole time. It was only then that Almark remembered to look around. Tohrk was scrambling up the slope, gasping for breath and with his hands on his knees. Almark was surprised Tohrk was so close behind him. His boasting wasn't all talk; he really had strong nerves.

"Good work keeping up, Tohrk. I can see it now."

Still catching his breath, Tohrk frowned at him. "Of course I kept up with you!" he snarled. "Is the first-year safe?"

"I think so. We should be able to save him." Almark swung his tree branch, cutting through the air with a sharp *whoosh*. "You can leave the rest to me. I'll handle it."

Almark raced down the slope.

Morgan ran to the forest's entrance with all his might, but he couldn't muster up the courage to go inside. All he could do was pace around anxiously. It was the same trail he was used to—one he could navigate even with his eyes closed—but right now, all he could see was a road to a den of monsters.

I'm so scared…, thought Morgan. *What am I going to do? Just thinking there are monsters in there makes this road I take every day look so scary. But Almark and Tohrk are in there, chasing the monster down. I have to go in and help them somehow. Isn't that why I came here?*

But even knowing that, he couldn't take a single step forward.

"Morgan."

Hearing someone call out to him, Morgan turned around with a start. "Oh, Wollis…"

The class representative, Wollis, was standing behind him with a serene expression. Morgan breathed a sigh of relief.

"There's big trouble," he told Wollis.

"What happened?" Wollis narrowed his eyes. "It's rare to see you

this pale in the face."

"A monster came out of the woods!" Morgan said.

Wollis's lips curled for a second. Morgan blinked—it almost looked like a smile.

"Wollis?"

"That's never happened before. This is no joke," Wollis said, ignoring the suspicious look Morgan gave him. The class representative was the picture of concern.

"So, what are you doing here?" he asked Morgan.

"Well, you see…" Morgan forgot about his momentary unease and looked pleadingly at Wollis. "A monster snatched one of the first-years. Almark and Tohrk went in to save him."

"What?" Wollis raised an eyebrow.

"It's just, I saw what looked like a monster's shadow near the woods once, too," Morgan said. "If I'd have told the teachers, maybe this wouldn't have happened."

Wollis shook his head. "It's not your fault."

"Still…" Morgan hung his head. "That wasn't the first time I saw a shadow like that on the road between the dorm and the schoolhouse."

Wollis's eyes glinted for a moment, but Morgan didn't notice.

"So I thought maybe I was just imagining things…"

"I understand." Wollis nodded. "Did you let the teachers know what happened?"

"A first-year girl managed to escape, and Deg and Garain took her with them to get a teacher."

"Mhm." Wollis looked toward the woods. "Don't worry, Morgan." He smiled comfortingly. "I'll go check it out. It's dangerous out here, so you head back to the schoolhouse."

"Are you sure?"

"I am."

"I'm sorry. I'm just a coward…" Morgan hung his head again. "I came all the way here, but I was too scared to do anything on my own…"

"You made the right choice." Wollis patted Morgan on the shoulder. "At your level, going after them wouldn't be brave. It'd just be reckless. You could end up getting in their way."

"…Right." Morgan's eyes were fixed on his feet. "Yeah, you're

right."

What would me going into the woods achieve? There's no way I'd actually be good enough to help Almark and Tohrk.

"But you don't need to brood over it. Everyone has things they're good and bad at, all right?" said Wollis. "Don't worry; I'll handle this."

He turned around. Morgan watched him run into the woods, his eyes glued to the class representative in something akin to prayer.

Almark raced down the slope with surprising speed. Hearing his footsteps, the jaranon spun around, Eldo still under its arm. It was slightly smaller than a human adult, and its body was covered in brown fur. Its one eye swiveled for a moment before focusing on Almark.

As shown in the way it effortlessly walked while carrying a child with one arm, jaranons had brute strength that far exceeded what their small stature implied. But their most menacing trait was their long, hardened claws, which were distinctive enough to have caught Morgan's attention. These claws could effortlessly tear through victims or act as spears, easily skewering a human body.

Almark intentionally made noise as he charged at the jaranon. He swung the branch in his hand around. This was, of course, a perfectly ordinary branch he'd snapped off a tree earlier. It had no special powers, but Almark swung it around like a large weapon, nonetheless.

Just as Almark had hoped, the jaranon let out a low growl and threw Eldo onto the ground, standing on guard with both hands extended. The plan worked. Almark could see Eldo hit the ground and stir gently.

Almark stopped just outside the range of the jaranon's claws. Holding the branch up like a sword, he stood at the ready. The jaranon swiped at the air menacingly, trying to intimidate Almark as it inched forward. It was being cautious, which meant it wouldn't make any sudden lunges at him.

Taking this chance to save Eldo, Tohrk finally ran down the slope, but he couldn't move as quickly as Almark did.

Seriously, how strong is he?! Grumbling to himself, Tohrk hurried down the slope, almost slipping. *Keep the jaranon distracted, you*

hear? I'll slowly pull Eldo away.

But Almark didn't do what Tohrk expected; instead, he moved in. He swiftly closed the distance between the jaranon and swung the branch, skimming it against the ground.

"Oh…," Tohrk uttered despite himself.

The swiftness of his strike was astounding. It was even faster than the thrust Almark had used on him in martial arts class. With a sharp *thwack*, the branch struck the jaranon hard on the jaw. The blow came faster than the eye could follow, leaving the jaranon unable to counter. But the next second, Almark took another step forward, landing a sideways blow on the jaranon's jaw. Blood spilled from the vicious ogre's mouth.

As he overwhelmed the jaranon, Almark thought to himself that this really did feel different. If he had his sword, he'd have severed its head with the first swipe and finished the fight right then and there. But the thing proved oddly resistant to blunt trauma.

The jaranon screeched in anger and swung its claws at Almark, but its attacks failed to so much as scratch the boy. Even dressed in a robe that made it harder to move, he overwhelmed the monster with his nimble footwork.

And whenever it attacked, it left itself open to retaliation. Each time the jaranon swung at him, Almark dodged and slammed the branch into its face. The attacks landed with dull thuds, each one strong enough to leave a human opponent dazed, but the jaranon was unfazed.

Still, Almark was successful in drawing the ogre's attention, gradually pulling it away from where Eldo was. Tohrk approached the fallen boy, still gasping. Clearly, Almark could handle the monster alone just fine. With that in mind, Tohrk turned his eyes to Almark—only to see something that defied belief. As Almark fought the creature, another jaranon was silently emerging from the bushes behind him.

"What…?"

Tohrk was stunned. Almark dodged the jaranon's attack effortlessly again, but it seemed he didn't notice the second one creeping up on him from behind. They were going to pincer him.

Tohrk gritted his teeth. *Ugh, dammit. I shouldn't have come here…!*

"Almark! Behind you!"

Almark looked back with a start, just as the jaranon creeping up on him swiped its claws. For a second it looked like the claws successfully hit Almark, but the next moment, he jumped away, landing beside the two jaranons. He moved fluidly, like he was parting his way through the branches, and the next moment the second jaranon groaned, cradling its mouth.

Tohrk just barely made out what happened. At the same time Almark dodged its swipe, he landed a counterattack on its face.

He really is absurd…

Astonished by Almark, Tohrk finally arrived at Eldo's side. He gently slapped the boy's pale cheeks, which made him groan. He was alive. Having confirmed this, Tohrk swiftly cast a spell. It wasn't precise and could end up hitting Almark, but Tohrk decided it was Almark's fault if he wasn't good enough to avoid a spell of this level.

Five flames formed in Tohrk's hand, one for each finger. This was Flame Fingers, a spell that was an offshoot of the will-o-wisp spell. Tohrk kept the five flames to a minimum, clenching his hand into a fist as he turned toward Almark, who was still maneuvering around the monsters. Then he opened his hand.

The five small fireballs went flying, each traveling along a different path. Three of them crashed into the first jaranon, which had its back to Tohrk. Meanwhile, the other two whizzed toward Almark, who—just as Tohrk expected—jerked his head aside to dodge them, with one fireball hitting the second jaranon right in the chest and the last missing its mark and hitting the ground instead.

Perhaps the fatigue had gotten to him and made his control of the spell waver. Tohrk clicked his tongue in displeasure. But the spell was still highly effective. The jaranon that had been hit by three of the fireballs fell to the ground in agony, its back smoking—likely because its fur had caught fire. The other one flinched away from the sudden fireballs.

Heh, inferior lifeforms always fear fire. Tohrk nodded to himself.

Almark seized the opening and swooped onto the second jaranon. Realizing blunt blows would get him nowhere, he mercilessly thrust the branch into the creature's sole eye.

Tohrk winced and looked away.

Unconcerned with the possibility of breaking the branch, Almark buried it deep into the jaranon's eye socket. Even as blood sprayed over him, Almark's composure didn't falter, save for his expression hardening slightly as he gritted his teeth and applied more force to the blow. The jaranon gave one last bloodcurdling screech and fell completely still.

Only one remained. Almark turned to face the jaranon rolling on the ground in an attempt to put out the fire on its back. With the branch having snapped a moment ago, he was now unarmed, but Almark didn't seem daunted by that at all. He glared at the jaranon with cold eyes.

Is he going to be all right? Tohrk clicked his tongue and started to cast a spell.

But then, Almark suddenly waved his right hand. The jaranon staggered back, holding onto its sole eye painfully. A hard fruit went rolling across the ground.

When did he pick this up?

Tohrk stared in disbelief. Almark had just flung some fruit he had picked up from the ground at the jaranon's eyes.

Almark then leaped toward the jaranon and pinned the creature down. The jaranon snarled in anger and flailed its arms, trying to shake its attacker off. Almark swiftly snaked over to the thrashing ogre's back and wrapped his legs around the creature.

Already unsteady, the jaranon stumbled backward, losing its balance. Sensing this, Almark pressed his arms hard against the jaranon's chest. The creature tumbled to the ground, almost as if it were a puppet under the control of a much smaller boy.

This jaranon had been standing next to its dead comrade. At some point, Almark had positioned the dead one so the claws on its right hand were pointed upward. The jaranon fell over with Almark straddling it and fell directly onto the claws, which pierced through its chest.

The jaranon let out a screech that shook the woods. But Almark held on, using all his weight to hold the jaranon down until it perished.

Once the second jaranon became completely still, Almark finally got up. He spat out a glob of spit mixed with blood and turned to Tohrk.

"Thanks, Tohrk," he said calmly. "If you hadn't warned me and cast that spell, I would've been a goner."

Still covered in blood, Almark flashed a hearty smile just as the sunlight shined down on him. As grisly as that was, he somehow looked gallant, like a knight who had just finished a battle. Tohrk was a little jealous.

"You said you'd handle it, but you really struggled against that thing," Tohrk quipped. "Also, the first-year's fine."

"Thank goodness." Almark flashed a carefree smile. "Tohrk, you called me by my name for the first time," he said, his gaze tender. "That made me so happy."

Almark was right. It had been in the heat of the moment, but truth be told, Tohrk still thought twice before doing it. He'd always avoided calling Almark by his name, feeling that doing that would mean acknowledging him as part of the class. His petty pride wouldn't allow it.

Seriously, this guy… A shiver ran down Tohrk's spine. *He never stopped for a moment throughout this intense fight, and yet he had enough presence of mind to care about that. Dammit, he really is different from everyone else. He and Wollis are cut from the same cloth.*

But at this point, Tohrk didn't feel bad admitting that. The fact that he called out Almark's name and Almark noticed it made him happy for some reason. Not that he would say that out loud, of course.

"I figured that was your name," he said with a scowl.

Almark looked stunned. "Yeah, and you got it right. Almark. That's my name."

Seeing Almark nod earnestly, Tohrk could no longer stop himself from bursting into laughter. Almark seemed a bit surprised, but he soon smiled and walked over to Eldo, who was still collapsed on the ground.

“Is he hurt?” Almark asked Tohrk.

“Not that I can tell.”

Once Tohrk realized that Eldo’s life wasn’t in danger, he lost interest in the boy.

Almark checked to see if Eldo was bleeding. “Eldo,” he called. “Eldo, hang in there.”

Eldo moaned but still didn’t wake up.

“Eldo.”

Almark patiently called out to him, but he was so unresponsive that Tohrk, who’d walked over to check the jaranons’ corpses, returned.

“He’s not waking up?” Tohrk asked.

“I think he’s just unconscious…,” Almark replied, visibly confused.

“Does that monster secrete some kind of venom?”

“It shouldn’t.” Almark shook his head.

“Then why’s he still passed out?”

“I don’t know.”

But then, a gust of wind blew through the woods. Almark looked up.

“Professor!”

Illmis had appeared, staff in hand.

“Almark, Tohrk, are you two hurt?” he asked, gazing sternly at the two boys.

“We’re all right,” said Almark. “But Eldo…”

“What?”

Illmis kneeled next to them and picked Eldo up. He swiftly checked for any injuries and slid his hand, which glowed white, over Eldo’s body. Illmis’s expression slowly relaxed.

“The boy’s fine. He just exhausted his mana.”

“His mana?” Almark and Tohrk exchanged a confused look.

“The first-year girl who came to the schoolhouse with Garain and Deg… Cecily, was it? She said that a monster appeared in the field, and Eldo protected her by filling the area with fog. He told her to run.”

“…So that’s what happened.”

Looking down at Eldo’s still face, Almark recalled what the boy had said the other day.

“I really feel like I’ll be able to fill a whole room with fog soon.”

At the time, Almark thought it was just another case of a first-year exaggerating to boast about their progress, but it turned out Eldo wasn’t lying. He had used up all his mana and put his own life in danger to protect Cecily. He really was one of the talented geniuses accepted into the institute.

“He’s got skill,” Tohrk said, speaking for Almark. “Not everyone can pull off stunts like that.”

“True,” Almark agreed.

Almark had plenty of factors that helped him win. Morgan gave him prior warning, and he had the fighting techniques and knowledge of jaranons he acquired in the North. All of that helped him act swiftly. But what if he was in the same position as Eldo…? Would he have made the best choice to save a classmate’s life, even if it meant putting himself in danger?

“The kid made it sound like he was looking after you.” Tohrk said, looking at Almark. “Well, lucky you, I guess, having such a dependable first-year keeping you safe.”

“That’s right,” Almark said with a serene expression. “I still have a lot to learn from him. So I think I’ll let him look after me a while longer.”

Illmis inspected the jaranon corpses and turned to look at Almark and Tohrk. “Did you two do this?”

“…Yes,” said Almark.

“It was mostly Almark, Professor,” Tohrk added brusquely. “I didn’t do much.”

“I see.”

“That’s not true,” Almark cut in. “I wouldn’t have made it here without Tohrk, and the spell he cast in the middle of the fight saved my life.”

“Mhm.” Illmis rose to his feet. “So you both took part in this.”

Tohrk shrugged, scowling.

“But to think that two jaranons would show up here…” Illmis looked down at the dead monsters, his face grave. “You boys did well.”

“So monsters do appear in these woods,” Tohrk said.

Illmis nodded. “Only occasionally… Things must have changed this year, though, if monsters have come down to such a shallow

part of the woods." His expression turned grim. "I imagine we'll conduct a thorough investigation of the woods and wipe out any monster dens in the area."

"Please, let me help with that," Tohrk said, but Illmis shook his head.

"Investigations are conducted by teachers and advanced division students. Elementary students are still too young for that."

Tohrk frowned in displeasure until there came another gust of wind. More teachers appeared one after another.

"Tohrk, Almark!" Fia, their homeroom teacher, hurried over. "I was worried sick. You're not hurt, are you?"

"We're fine," both said, to which she sighed with relief.

"Everyone else is worried, too. Come, let's go back."

"…Okay."

Almark watched Selia, the institute's healer, give Eldo some kind of restorative tonic. Then he began his trek back to the dorms. Tohrk followed quietly, but a few moments later, he pushed Almark aside.

"You stay behind me."

Tohrk threw back his shoulders and walked ahead of Almark, who blinked in surprise.

"Why?"

"You spent all day running ahead of me."

Almark tilted his head. This answer didn't make much sense. Tohrk scoffed bitterly and strode forward.

Almark looked back at Tohrk and cracked a smile. "Fine, Tohrk," he said. "You walk ahead of me, then."

Tohrk clicked his tongue audibly in place of an answer.

Hidden among the treetops near the pit where Almark and Tohrk battled the jaranons sat one boy.

"I can't believe Morgan saw the shadow. I suppose I must be getting careless," Wollis said, watching the teachers hustling through the woods. "I don't want to waste my time. I should exercise more caution."

He dropped his gaze to the base of the tree he was sitting on. Lying there were the corpses of two jaranons, their throats ripped out by what looked like gigantic fangs.

“Still, there are so many monsters in these woods. The eddy of fate really is starting to churn.” Wollis dropped his voice; there was a hint of dark joy to it. “A dark wind blows from the north. Will it reach as far as Norkh Island, or…?”

Hushed by the rustling of the leaves, his words were heard by no one.

* * *

“Almark!” a voice called as soon as Almark and Tohrk left the woods.

Almark raised his head, and Tohrk clicked his tongue. Cecily must have spread the word about what had happened when she ran to the schoolhouse, because Wendy and Morgan were waiting for Almark, their faces contorted in concern.

“Tohrk! Oh, thank goodness, you’re all right, too?”

Deg and Garain, who were with them, sighed with relief when they saw that Tohrk was safe.

“What’s with you two?” Tohrk shrugged, looking annoyed. “It was no big deal.”

“Wow.” Deg and Garain exchanged looks. “You heard that? He said it was no big deal. Tohrk really is awesome.”

“Yeah, that’s Tohrk for you.”

“Cut it out.” Tohrk glared at the two boys and walked off.

“Thanks, Tohrk,” Almark called out. “You saved me today.”

“Hmph.” Tohrk didn’t even turn around, but his two cronies followed him happily.

“Almark, you’re hurt!” Wendy gasped, looking at his face.

“What, this?” Almark wiped a drop of jaranon blood clinging to his cheek with a sleeve. “Don’t worry, it’s not my blood,” he said calmly.

Wendy sighed. “That’s good, then. I was worried.”

“I’m sorry, Almark!” Morgan wailed as he tugged on Almark’s sleeve.

“Whoa!” Almark stumbled backward. “What’s wrong, Morgan?”

“It’s all my fault!” Morgan shouted. “If I’d have told a teacher about the shadow I saw by the woods, this wouldn’t have happened!”

“Oh, that’s what’s bothering you?” Almark smiled. “You were a big help. I only knew how urgent things were when Cecily came to me because of what you’d told me about that shadow.” Almark placed a hand on Morgan’s shoulder. “You said you saw it had claws, right? Between that and what Cecily told me, I figured out it was a jaranon. Just knowing what I’d be going up against helped me come up with a way to fight it. I couldn’t have done it without

you."

"So what I told you was useful…?"

"Of course." Almark nodded. "Jaranons have long claws, and that's what you saw. You weren't imagining things."

"But I'm so pathetic…" Morgan hung his head. "When I heard you and Tohrk went into the woods, I wanted to go after you. But I couldn't pluck up the courage and ended up just…pacing around here…" Morgan then recalled his conversation with Wollis and added quietly, "Well, even if I did come along, I'd just get in your way…"

"Well, actually…," Almark said, realizing something. "If you'd come along, you would've been an even bigger help."

Morgan looked up, taken aback by Almark's words. Almark met his gaze with a carefree smile.

"I thought I could handle everything by myself, but I would've been in big trouble if Tohrk hadn't come with me."

"Huh?"

"I hate to admit it, but I don't think I'd have found the jaranon on my own," Almark said, his smile becoming strained. "I could've used your encouragement."

"What? No…" Morgan cast his gaze to the ground. "I'm no good at anything…"

"That's not true. You've got keen eyes—the kind that notice important details. You'd have been a huge help. So next time something happens, I'll be counting on you, Morgan."

He patted Morgan on the shoulder encouragingly.

"Me, too." Wendy raised her hand cheerfully. "I also want to help you, Almark."

"Thanks." Almark beamed at Wendy. "Nothing could be more encouraging than having you around."

"Just say the word if you need me." Wendy spread her arms around Almark's and Morgan's shoulders in a big hug. "You too, Morgan. Okay?"

Visibly confused, Morgan looked between his two friends and nodded gingerly. "…Okay."

When he saw Almark's calm gaze, Morgan felt his withering heart begin to fill with courage.

"I'll help wherever I can," he said.

“Yeah. We’ll be counting on you, Morgan.”

“Oh, that reminds me…” Morgan faced Almark; he seemed to have remembered something crucial. “Wollis went into the woods after you two. Did you see him at all?”

“Wollis? After me and Tohrk?” Almark looked surprised. “No, I didn’t see him.”

“Oh dear.” Wendy lowered her arms, her expression clouding over. “What if he’s still in the woods?”

“I’m right here,” a serene voice said behind her.

The three friends turned around and saw Wollis walking out of the forest.

“Wollis!” Morgan looked relieved. “Oh, I’m so glad…!”

“I really don’t know what came over me,” Wollis said with a strained smile. “I went after you two when Morgan told me what happened, but the woods are so vast. The whole thing was over by the time I got there.” He approached Almark and patted him on the shoulder. “The first-year is safe, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Thank you.” Wollis smiled kindly at Almark and walked past him.

“Aren’t you going to head back to the dorms with us, Wollis?” Wendy asked.

Wollis shook his head. “I talked a big game to Morgan, but I wasn’t able to do anything when it counted most. Almark gets all the credit, so take your time and thank him for it.”

Almark watched Wollis depart for the schoolhouse.

“What’s wrong, Almark?” Wendy directed a curious gaze at Almark when she noticed he wasn’t moving.

“Oh, nothing.” Almark smiled. “Never mind me.”

That was a lie, he thought. *Wollis reeked of blood. He lied about not getting there in time*.

Almark looked in Wollis’s direction again. For a second, he got the distinct feeling that something sinister was brewing within the class representative. But then Almark blinked, and the feeling vanished.

“Next time I hear rumors, I’ll be sure to share them with everyone!” Morgan said, pulling Almark back into the conversation.

“Rumors?” Almark asked.

“Yeah.” Morgan nodded earnestly. “I mean, maybe those rumors will end up saving someone!”

Almark and Wendy exchanged a look.

“Yeah, that’s a good idea,” said Almark.

“Yes, keep the rumors coming.” Wendy smiled.

Morgan grinned at them.

“Let’s go back to the dorms,” Almark suggested. “I’m hungry after all that running.”

“Me too,” Morgan replied. “I’m hungry after all that worrying.”

Wendy giggled. The three friends walked side by side, their shadows cast long under the setting sun.

Side Story

The Strange Window

It happened one morning.

Almark left the dorm, like every day, and on the way to the schoolhouse he saw a familiar figure walking in the sunlight. A smile played on his lips. He jogged over to her.

“Morning, Wendy.”

“Oh, Almark.” Wendy turned around, her voice perking up cheerfully. “Not often I run into you here.”

“Yeah.” Almark smiled. “I’m always out around this time. You’re just a bit later than usual today.”

“You’re right.” Wendy nodded, walking beside him. “My roommate needed to talk, and I only ended up leaving for class now.”

“You have a roommate?”

“Yes, a girl from Class 1,” Wendy said with a bit of a strained smile. “She’s fun to be around, but once she gets talking, it’s hard to get her to stop.”

“Really? I have a room all to myself, so that never happens to me…” Almark smiled back at her. “Sounds fun, though.”

“Well, yes. I suppose it’s fun in its own way.”

Chatting idly, the two continued down the road to the schoolhouse.

“Summer’s almost here.” Wendy looked up at the blue sky, the wind toying with her hair. “It’s getting hotter.”

“We’re still not at summer?” Almark said with a strained smile. “In the North, it only gets this hot during the height of summer.”

“Is that so?” Wendy’s eyes widened. “It’s going to get even hotter here.”

“Really?” Almark scratched his head nervously. “I do know what summer is like in the central plains, at least. I traveled there on the way here.” He rolled up his sleeves. “Still, I was surprised by how much hotter it is compared to the North. I kept thinking summer in the South must be difficult.”

“I only know what summer is like around here, so I really can’t compare…” Wendy tilted her head bashfully. “Right, it’s so much colder where you come from.”

“Yeah.”

“Come on.” Wendy looked at Almark, smiling sheepishly. “Tell me what summers in the North are like.”

“Up North, huh? Hm…” Almark looked up to the sky, searching for the words.

Summers in the North. The first thing to come to mind was a vivid greenery that stood out against the blue sky. Life suppressed by the cold singing out to put its resilience on full display. This was the scenery of the North’s brief summers.

“Summers in the North are…short,” Almark began, but then he heard loud footsteps behind them, and something soft sandwiched between the two of them.

“Hey, you two, listen!”

“Whoa!”

“Ah!”

It was Morgan.

“What’s wrong, Morgan?”

“I just heard something interesting,” Morgan grinned as he looked between the two of them.

“Interesting?”

“Yep!” Morgan affirmed and walked between the two of them. “I think I’ll bring it up with everyone in class when we get there. It’s a good thing I ran into you guys. I’ll tell you ahead of everyone else.”

“Thanks.” Almark smiled. “I’m curious now.”

“That’s the spirit! I knew I could count on you, Almark.” Morgan grinned, satisfied with Almark’s cooperation, but then he turned serious. “Have you two heard about the secret room on the third floor of the schoolhouse?”

“There’s a secret room?” Almark pondered. “I’ve never heard of it.”

“Me neither.” Wendy blinked. “The third floor is where our classroom is, right? I think I would’ve heard about any secret rooms there.”

“Heh-heh…” Morgan gave a dramatic chuckle. “You’d think so, wouldn’t you?”

“Um, yeah?” Wendy nodded.

Morgan threw out his chest. “Well, as it turns out, that room is real!”

“Huh?” Wendy frowned. “Then where is it?”

“Come on, it wouldn’t be much of a secret room if I just told you, now would it?” Morgan said. “But I can tell you how to find it. At lunch break, go to the schoolyard and look up at the schoolhouse. You’ll notice that one of the windows on the third floor looks strange. That’s the secret room!”

“Strange, how exactly?”

“Uh, I don’t know,” Morgan said quizzically. “I didn’t get all the details on that.”

“And it has to be during lunch?” Wendy asked.

Morgan nodded.

“But why?”

“I dunno. I didn’t get the details on that, either.”

“And who told you about this, anyway?”

“Someone from Class 1.”

“And you didn’t check it yourself, did you?” Almark asked.

“Of course not. I mean, I’m busy eating during lunch. Why would I go outside?”

It was all so vague and obscure that Almark and Wendy had to exchange doubtful looks.

Morgan frowned in disappointment. “Oh, so that’s how you feel. All right.” He nodded. “I won’t tell everyone in class about it, then.”

Morgan stuck to his word, and when he got to class, he didn’t tell anyone about the rumor, as if he’d all but forgotten about it. Almark settled into his seat and got ready for class, Morgan’s story already gone from his thoughts.

“Say, Almark,” Wendy whispered while he read the textbook. “What do you think about what Morgan said?”

“Uh, I’m not sure.” Almark looked up from the textbook

quizzically. “It all sounds too vague to mean much.”

“That’s all?”

Wendy looked at him with her large eyes, and Almark had to avert his gaze.

“I mean, it does sound strange.”

“Right?!” Wendy nodded eagerly. “It’s a strange story. It’s so vague, but specific in the weirdest parts.”

“I feel like most of the rumors Morgan hears are like that.”

“Let’s check it out. Together.” Wendy’s eyes were sparkling. “I mean, we’re the only ones in our class who’ve heard about it, right?”

“Yeah, that’s true.”

“And unlike last time with the voice in the garden, we don’t have to go anywhere too far to check it out.” Wendy’s voice was incredibly cheerful as she looked at Almark. “So, can we?”

“I don’t mind,” Almark answered calmly. “You know, I remember thinking this back when we heard about the rumor with the garden, but you really like this sort of thing.”

“Yeah…” Wendy gave a sheepish smile. “I do, honestly.”

“Then I’ll tag along. You always help me out, after all.” Almark grinned. “So, how are we going to check it out?”

“As soon as lunch break starts, let’s go outside before we go to the dining hall.”

“That’s simple enough,” Almark agreed. “Okay, once classes end, let’s go outside.”

After morning classes, Almark and Wendy both left the classroom at once.

“Okay, let’s hurry up and go take a look!” Wendy said as she jogged through the hall. “We don’t want to end up missing lunch!”

“Yeah, that would be bad,” Almark said, running beside her.

But just then, a slender student walked out of a nearby class and sharply chided them.

“Hey, no running in the halls! Do you want to get yourselves hurt?!”

“Sorry, Ein!” Wendy stopped in her tracks and apologized. She then started walking with swift steps, sticking out her tongue impishly at Almark. “Someone from another class just scolded us.”

“Yeah. Let’s be careful.”

The two made a turn in the hallway and went out to the lawn of the schoolyard as rays of early summer sunlight shined on them. Almark had already thought it was hot that morning, but noon was an entirely different beast. He could really tell the seasons were changing.

At this time of day, everyone normally headed for the dining hall, so the schoolyard was empty save for the two of them.

“Remember, Almark, third floor.” Wendy said, shading her eyes with a hand as she looked up at the schoolhouse.

“Right, I remember.”

Almark did the same and looked up at the building. As always, he could see the windows of the third-year classrooms: Classes 1, 2 and 3. Next to them were the windows of the classrooms for specific subjects, as well as some empty classrooms.

“None of the windows look strange,” Almark pointed out.

“Yeah…” Wendy squinted up at the building. “Everything looks normal… Ah.” Suddenly, her eyes widened, and she pointed up. “Almark, look at that.”

“Oh…,” Almark called out despite himself.

At the edge of the schoolhouse, at the wall situated between the second and third floors, was a single window. Almark couldn’t recall if he’d ever seen a window in such an odd spot. And while that alone was peculiar, there were other strange aspects to the window. When exposed to the sunlight, it seemed to appear and disappear, its contours fuzzy and unclear—like a mirage from a heat daze.

“What’s that window…?” Almark blinked. “Wendy, what room is it for…?”

“Isn’t it a staircase?” Wendy answered. “I mean, see that window? That’s our classroom… Hmm. Yeah, I think that would be where the staircase between the second and third floors is.”

“The staircase… Was there a window over there?”

“I don’t remember one…”

But even as they discussed this, the window continued wavering like a reflection on the water, and soon vanished.

The two hurried into the dining hall and rushed through their

lunch. After that, they dashed to the spot where they saw the window outside. Like Wendy had said, it was the staircase between the second and third floors. And though there was a skylight above them for illumination, the spot where they saw the window outside had nothing but an empty wall on it.

"But this was the spot, right?" Wendy turned around to look at Almark, looking confused. "This has to be where we saw the window."

"Yeah." Almark nodded. "This was the spot."

"Hmmm…" Wendy patted the wall. "There's nothing there…"

In the end, they found nothing suspicious on the walls or the stairs. The bell rang, marking the end of lunch break, and they had no choice but to go to class.

After classes, on his way to meditation training with Illmis, Almark looked up at the schoolhouse once again. There was still no sign of the window.

The next day…

"Let's go check it out, Almark," Wendy said when they met in the classroom that morning. "Today during lunch, let's go look for that window again!"

"A-all right…," Almark said, a bit overwhelmed by her enthusiasm. "Sure, yeah, let's go see it."

"It's all I've been thinking about since yesterday!" Wendy said. "I really want to figure it out today."

And so, all but physically pulled along by Wendy's enthusiasm, Almark bolted out of the classroom with her as soon as morning classes ended.

"Huh?"

The two of them looked up at the same spot as yesterday, but now the spot where they saw the window the day prior was covered by nothing but wall.

"There's no window…," Almark muttered.

"…Yeah." Wendy nodded.

But at that very moment, the window flickered into existence.

"There it is!" Wendy gasped.

The window wavered for a few moments, shimmering and wobbling before, just like the day prior, it eventually vanished.

"…What does it mean?" Wendy asked aloud as she patted the wall of the third-floor staircase. "What is that window?"

Just like yesterday, there was no window there, just blank wall.

"We can think about this later," Almark said. "Let's go, we're gonna be late for class."

"Yeah…" Wendy looked at the wall, clearly loath to leave, but eventually walked away.

Their next class was with Demitor, the kind, gentlemanly teacher assigned to Year 3 Class 3. Almark could see Morgan's head nodding off from the seat in front of his, likely lulled to sleep by Demitor's calming voice.

"Leading a healthy lifestyle is crucial for a mage," Demitor said with a smile. "In ages past, mages would live in seclusion, staying in dark caves as they spent their days reading. And while research is important, their bodies became unwell. They became quite thin and pale."

"Like Professor Illmis," Nelson muttered, which triggered a bit of chuckling from the class.

"Hm? Professor Illmis?" Demitor narrowed his eyes. "Yes. He's definitely the very image of an old-styled mage," Demitor said without a hint of sarcasm. "Sunlight is the source of a human's life force. And, indeed, the sun is closely related to the mana we mages draw our strength from. That's why you should make sure you expose yourself to sunlight, so you can ensure your bodies produce high-quality mana."

"But Professor," Nelson said as he raised a hand. "If that's the case, why is the magic training area so dark?"

"A fine question, Nelson. That's the tricky part, you see." Demitor smiled. "Sufficient rest and exposure to sunlight is required for the body to produce mana, but in order to properly grasp and harness your mana, you need to focus your mind. And it's harder to focus when your surroundings are lit up."

"Right…" Nelson nodded. "Yeah, it is harder to concentrate when there's light on you."

"Not like you can concentrate when it's dark, either," Norish teased, which made the students laugh again.

"And that's why the magic training area has to be dark," Demitor said, chuckling at Norish's remark. "In that regard, the afternoon

sun being so bright might be why you're having so much trouble focusing in class." Demitor glanced at Morgan, who was sleeping blissfully in the sunlight, and cracked a strained smile. "Morgan, here, seems to be building up his supply of life force, for example."

Once class was over and Demitor left the room, Almark approached Wendy.

"Wendy."

"Yes?"

"What Professor Demitor said earlier got me thinking," Almark whispered, leaning in. "Remember how that window appeared right after lunch break started, at noon? When the sun's at its highest?"

"Uh, yeah?"

"So that means maybe the place behind that window only appears when the sun, the source of all mana, is at its peak. That's probably why it's pointless to go looking at where the window should be at the staircase after the window disappears."

"So you're saying…" Wendy brought her face close to Almark and whispered. "Next time there's lunch, we shouldn't go looking for the window at the schoolyard."

"Right." Almark nodded. "Once morning classes end, we should go check the stairs."

The following day, at lunch, Almark and Wendy hurried out of the classroom as soon as the teacher left and ran to the staircase. Thankfully, the student from the next class over didn't come out to scold them for it. But when they reached the stairs, there was, perhaps as expected, the same as usual. There was no window on the wall.

"Nothing here…" Wendy said, placing a hand on the wall, disappointed. "I really thought you were onto something…"

"Yeah. I thought it was a good idea." Almark tapped on the wall.

"But thinking about it, if a window suddenly appeared here by the stairs, someone would have noticed by now," Wendy mused. "It'd be a bigger rumor."

"You might be right," Almark agreed.

Wendy sighed, placing a hand on the wall. "Hmm, it really is weird… Whoa!"

She gave a little yelp and suddenly sank into the wall, disappearing from sight.

"Wendy!

Almark hurriedly pushed the wall around where Wendy had vanished, but it didn't feel like he was touching a solid wall. Instead, his body sank into the wall with an odd, weightless sensation.

"Almark!"

Seeing Wendy there, calling for him, Almark sighed in relief. They were in a small room, with a window overlooking the schoolyard on the wall across from them. On the right-side wall was a door that led somewhere unknown.

"Almark, this place…" Wendy looked at him anxiously.

A desk and chair had been set up by the window, but there was nothing on the desk.

"This is the window we saw outside."

Almark looked out the window, seeing the empty schoolyard under them. This was, without a doubt, the window they looked up at just yesterday.

"Yeah," Wendy said, standing beside Almark. "But what is this room…?"

Suddenly, they heard a rattling coming from the right side door. Both of them froze.

"Wendy, come here."

Almark reflexively grabbed Wendy by the arm, pulling her against the opposite wall. The door opened, and a short old lady appeared there. The old lady walked into the room and, upon seeing the two, frowned her wrinkly face.

"Oh, what are you two doing here?" she said.

The two of them stared at her, unable to instantly come up with what to say.

"Miss Maya…," Wendy whispered when the dorm supervisor suddenly showed up. "Is this your room?"

"Huh?" Maya looked up at them with severe eyes, and then clicked her tongue, like she realized something unpleasant. "Oh, I understand. You two came from the elementary division's schoolhouse, didn't you?"

"Yes," Wendy replied. "But if you mean we came *from* the

schoolhouse… Does that mean we're *not* in the schoolhouse?"

Miss Maya huffed and jerked her chin in the direction of the door she just walked through.

Almark and Wendy peered through the door and let out a little yelp.

"That's the dorm supervisor's room!"

Almark remembered the place, as it was where Zeid the guard took him on his first day in the dorm to give his regards to Miss Maya. It was apparently right next to this room.

"But, how?"

"Why are we in the dorms?"

As the two looked around, puzzled, Miss Maya mumbled to herself. "Don't tell anyone about this, you hear?" The old woman hopped onto a chair. "The first floor of the dorms hardly gets any sunlight, right? So I connected this room with the schoolhouse. This way, I can get some sunlight, and it's convenient if I have any business there."

"You connected it? Like, with magic?" Almark asked.

Miss Maya gave him a fed-up look. "How else would I have done it? Of course it's with magic. If you can connect the two buildings with sheer strength, go ahead, show me."

"Wow," Wendy whispered. "That's really advanced magic."

"There's a knack to it. Magic is like knitting that way." Miss Maya waved a hand dismissively. "Once you get used to it, it's nothing serious." She then cast her gaze out the window and looked down at the schoolyard. "But it's almost time I tune the spell I cast to connect the rooms. Whenever it's summer, the sunlight gets stronger, and the spell ends up being easier to see. Which is how you found it."

Miss Maya hopped off the chair.

"Now, get out. I need to recast the spell." She waved a hand, shooing the two away. "Go on, scram."

"Well, if we're getting in the way, we'll leave." Almark touched the wall they entered through with a hand, but his body didn't pass through it this time. "Huh?"

"What are you doing?" Miss Maya glared at him. "Only the one who cast the spell, me, can get out through there. You two only got in here because the noon sun made the spell too strong."

“Uh…” Almark and Wendy exchanged a glance, and then looked at Maya. “So how do we get out of here?”

“That goes without saying.” Miss Maya pointed at the door she just entered from. “That’s the only door you have. They’re going to put lunch away soon, so I suggest you hurry back to the schoolhouse.”

Leaving through that door meant emerging from the dorm supervisor’s room. Thinking about the distance from the dorm to the schoolhouse, the color drained from their faces.

“Wendy, we have to go.”

“Right!”

The two bowed their heads to Miss Maya and made to bolt out of the room.

“Ah, wait,” she said, signaling them to stop. Miss Maya handed them each a ball of candy covered in a wrapper. “Your hush money,” she said with a smirk. “If you miss lunch, try licking on this. It’ll fill your bellies up so much you won’t go hungry for a couple days.”

“Uh, thank you.”

The two thanked her with uneasy smiles on their faces and ran out of the room. As they opened the large front doors to the dorm, early summer sunlight washed over them. The two sprinted down the road together, but the way to the schoolhouse was considerably long.

Wendy suddenly laughed out loud beside Almark. “Heh-heh-heh! What are we doing?!” She looked at him with a smile. “Why are we running like it’s the end of the world?”

“Uh, come to think of it, you’re right.”

Almark laughed, too. It was strange, the way they were acting. And once he started laughing, there was no stopping it. The two stopped in their tracks and laughed together for a minute.

“We should tell Morgan,” Wendy said, wiping away tears of laughter. “We should say, ‘We got in trouble because of your rumor’.”

“She paid us hush money, though.” Almark took out the candy from his robe’s sleeve. “We probably shouldn’t mention it.”

“True.” Wendy paused for thought, and then grinned. “But if we give our hush money to Morgan, we can probably tell him.”

“Is that how it works?” Almark crossed his arms, not quite wrapping his mind around the logic here. “Do you think Morgan will like it? I mean, candy that keeps you full for two days.”

Wendy chuckled at how earnestly Almark pondered this. “You’re too serious, Almark.” She then continued down the road. “We have until we make it to the schoolhouse to decide what we’re going to do.”

“Yes.” Almark walked beside her. The schoolhouse was still a ways off. “Plenty of time to figure that out.”

“Yeah. In which case…” Wendy paused and looked at Almark; she seemed to have remembered something. “Can you tell me more about what summer is like in the North?”

“Oh, right, we did talk about that.” Almark looked up at the sky. “Northern summers are…”

He narrowed his gaze as if he was staring at somewhere far away. Wendy couldn’t begin to imagine the distances Almark was picturing in his mind.

“…bursting with color. Blue skies. Verdant forests.”

Wendy looked up, drawn by Almark’s words, at the blue sky of early summer.

Soaking in the sunlight that gave all life its strength, Almark wondered if today would be the day he’d produce potent mana.

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